LIBRARY OF HORROR PRESS

ALIENOLOGY

TALES FROM THE VOID

EDITED BY T. PATRICK ROONEY AND D.G. SUTTER

Alienology: Tales from the Void
Edited by T. Patrick Rooney and D.G. Sutter

Published by arrangement with the authors.

"Alienology: Tales From The Void"
Edited by T. Patrick Rooney and D. G. Sutter
Smashwords Edition

Cover Art Sketch by Anthony N. Noel
Cover Art and Design by Grace Lee and T. Patrick Rooney
Interior formatting by Kody Boye.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means (electronically, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the proper written permission of both the copyright owner and —Library of Horror Press, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. People, places, events and situation are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living, dead or undead, or historical events, is purely coincidental.

Table of contents

ALIEN by John C. Mannone
Devil's Hole by Michael C. Lea
Space Freaks by Carey Burns
Fuck You E.T.M. by M.S. Gardner
We Dream in Aquamarine by Kody Boye
Blind Encounter by Pete Mesling
Seed by Kevin Wallis
Salt and Copper by Chris Bartholomew
Midnight In A Small Town by Wayne Goodchild
Common Ground by Lance Schonberg
It Came From Outer Space by Mike Smith
Jacob's Bad Day by Justin Cyril Vokey
The Conservators by Paul A. Freeman
Lights, Camera, Action by Jessy Marie Roberts
Heavenward by Frank Roger
The Ancient Monsters by Kristen Lee Knapp
The Stranger by David Bernstein
Newly Merged by Deborah Walker
The Fruits Of Incubation by Robert Essig
Heir to a Vacant Throne by Patrick Rutigliano
The Swarm by John McCuaig
Night and the Desperate Moon by Timothy W. Long
Church of the Deviate Minds by Jameson T. Caine
The Last Hero by Alva J. Roberts

Jeb & the Taladradoras del Cerebro by Jeffrey Wooten

Road Kill by Mark Wolf

The Blues by Shawn Cook

Sector C by D.G. Sutter & T. Patrick Rooney

ALIEN

By John C. Mannone

I hear *Nostromo's* engines thrum
with sonorous hum of organs,
that surround sound vibrating rib
bones pressed against chairs. Deep
tones resonant with fear.

But there is no sound in vacuum,
not even when stars explode.
They splatter the black with fire,
in silence.

In silence, the monstrous hulk warps
through distant galaxies, dissolving
twenty million tons of vermillion ore
mined there.

Ship's crew, in cryo-stasis, awakens
in distress, inside nightmares

of another race that were giants,
but not big enough. Their cry
is lost in methane winds
blowing across the purple ice;
their plaintive whispers leaking

into space.

We hear, but we do not listen:
Danger. Stay Away. Danger!
Letters seem to drip viridian,
their glow, a washing mist inside
dungeon-parts of the alien ship,
now wrecked on a lifeless world.

Steam seethes through
the honeycombed waves
of hardened secretions

bridging the zone between our worlds.

There is movement: A black sheen
skinks inside shadows, a serpentine
tail extrudes from thorax, reptilian.
Oblong head curves to a sharp slope.
Jaws salivate, gaping razors glisten.

It turns, lunges.
No one can hear the screams,
there is no sound in vacuum

just the ripping
through the movie screen.

DEVIL'S HOLE

by Michael C. Lea

You must forgive me if my hasty penmanship should reveal the trembling of my hand, or if the failure of my composure should cause stains to mar this manuscript. Allowing for the things I have seen in the last week, and particularly in the last few hours, I marvel that I am able to put quill to parchment at all. It shall be something of a miracle if these words ever reach another human being; I must not be deterred by anything as banal as a smudge or a line gone astray.

It is not right, not equitable, that this burden has fallen upon my shoulders. I am but a humble scientist–a dabbler, really, a hobbyist who likes to poke at mussels and sea-stars and call himself learned. I am no one of consequence. I have no capacity for heroism, and am ill-equipped to combat the threat which has menaced the islands, and now threatens to enslave us all–

That sound–

I had thought it was only the creaking of planks, the sigh of the wind, but it is not. Instead, something is stirring in the bowels of the ship. My passengers grow restless. My time is short.

I must find the beginning.

Very well. As I have written, I am something of an amateur scientist, specializing in invertebrate marine organisms. By

accident of birth I have never lacked for an income, and thus I travel as I please in pursuit of my studies. So it was that I came only a few short days ago to the colony of Bermuda, specifically to Smith's Parish. There, I was to examine the unique creatures that populate the tidal pools near Spittal Pond.

My journey to the island was uneventful, even pleasant. I suppose that some might have found it harrowing, but I have endeavoured to spend as much of my life at sea as possible. I have weathered more difficult Atlantic crossings.

What awaited me on the island was, of course, a different matter altogether.

Upon my arrival I was welcomed by Sir Frederick Smith, a linear descendant of Sir Thomas Smith himself, for whom Smith's Parish is named. Sir Frederick arranged for a carriage to bring me to his estate, which was quaint but more than adequate. I observed that he kept a number of glass aquariums of large size, each enclosing a many-coloured sample of the local marine life. I had no doubt that he was a fellow marine enthusiast as he had claimed in his letters.

Sir Frederick accompanied me to the pond, along with two servants whose names I cannot recall. I only remember their crisp white clothing, apparently new, which made me wonder if Sir Frederick had them dressing in their Sunday best for my benefit. They were terse but workmanlike sorts, not at all unpleasant.

Spittal Pond was so close to the sea-coast that we could see and hear the pounding of the Atlantic surf. Only a narrow barrier of gray rocks separated it from the sea. As we topped the

rocky rise to look down on the pond, an unpleasant sulfurous odour caused me to recoil.

"Ah, yes," Sir Frederick chuckled, seeing my response. "The pond is fresh water, you see. But every once in a while a storm drives seawater over this rise and into the pond. See there?" He pointed to a particularly noisome-looking greenish-yellow patch of water. "Brackish," he explained.

"Lovely," I muttered.

"You'll get used to it," he promised.

Sir Frederick seemed oddly cheerful, but he had a strong incentive to maintain a cheerful disposition and a stiff upper lip. He wished to build an aquarium and research centre on the island, and had extended an invitation to me in the hope that I might extend my considerable financial support.

We climbed down, straggling across jagged gray rocks to reach the pond. As we neared our destination, Sir Frederick slipped. He threw an arm out to catch himself, and his palm slid across the sharp rocks. A red smear trailed after it. Oddly, he seemed not to notice.

"Your hand," I said, as one of the servants helped him to regain his feet. For some reason, the two of them also refrained from acknowledging the injury.

"What of it?" Sir Frederick replied, continuing on his way.

I caught his arm and rotated it, pulling back the sleeve. The gash in his palm was clearly visible. I was relieved to see that it was a minor injury, but it should have been very painful.

Sir Frederick laughed it off. "There's English fortitude for you," he said. "Just a flesh wound, my friend. Nothing to worry

about. I'll clean it once we reach that tide pool." As he straightened his sleeve and lowered it again, I noticed several red marks along his arm.

We reached our destination, which was actually a cluster of several tide pools. Exposed only at low tide, these pools were natural aquaria, displaying all manner of sea creatures stranded by the retreating high tide. Their typical citizens included starfish, anemones, and other colourful denizens of the deep who normally cannot be viewed without diving.

I could not suppress a half-frown of disappointment, however, upon viewing the tide pools near Spittal Pond. If only I could go back and whisper in my own ear, I would advise myself to grin like a madman, offer Sir Frederick a large sum of money for his centre, and depart on the next ship to England.

But no.

Sir Frederick noticed immediately. "You don't look terribly impressed," he observed.

"Well," I admitted, trying to choose my words carefully, "I'm sure that these pools normally contain quite a profusion of sea life. But at the moment they seem to be limited mostly to Batillaria snails and hermit crabs, which I've had the opportunity to study extensively elsewhere."

"Ah, well," Sir Frederick said, although he still looked quite pleased. "I was saving the real treat for later. Come along!"

We were off again, with the tireless servants in tow. We returned to the road and traveled northeast for some distance– perhaps somewhere between half a mile and a mile. We stopped at

the southeastern corner of Harrington Sound, where the island grew very narrow indeed.

"All these pools and lagoons and whatnot, we don't know how most of them drain," Sir Frederick said, out of nowhere. "We know they connect to the sea somehow, but we've no idea where."

He led us through the brush, I assumed to another set of tide pools. "How is that?" I asked, mostly to be polite.

"It all happens underground," he replied. "Through sea caves. Bloody islands are riddled with them. No air inside, so most of what happens down there is a mystery to us." He paused, and added with a flourish, "Except for this one!"

He held some underbrush aside, and I saw that I was standing on the edge of a huge sinkhole. A large round gap in the earth dropped down through gray volcanic rock to a sparkling cauldron of blue-green water. As I watched, a large sea turtle raised its head, paddled a few strokes, and then dove down again.

"We call it Devil's Hole," Sir Frederick said. He turned and started down a path that curved around the edge of the sinkhole. The two servants scrambled to follow him.

"Whatever for?" I asked, walking after them somewhat more carefully. It was not a difficult path, but a minor misjudgment could have resulted in my tumbling into the water.

"You'll find out soon enough," he replied, grinning over his shoulder. "This used to be one of the sea caves. Then the ceiling fell in. We are left with a natural aquarium that exceeds anything I could construct. A perfect location for study, eh?"

I had to admit, it was an impressive site. The sun shone strongly as we climbed to the bottom. There were only a few ineffectual clouds in the sky, and there was little shade in the sinkhole itself. I wiped sweat away from my forehead, grateful for a light breeze that had sprung up.

My gratitude was answered with a moan, a ghastly, spine-prickling wail that seemed to rise up from the water and fill the sinkhole with the cries of the damned.

"My God," I cried, clutching the wall of the sinkhole and going no further. "What is that?"

As quickly as it had sprung up, the moaning ceased. "That would be the Devil," Sir Frederick said. He looked back over his shoulder and saw me standing there paralysed. "Come on, man," he exhorted. "Nothing to worry about. It's just the wind, blowing through the sinkhole. It's a bit of a natural echo chamber, you see."

To this day, I do not know if Sir Frederick was correct, or if the moaning noise was a warning, a dark omen of things to come. At any rate, I regained my composure and continued to the bottom.

The natural aquarium at the bottom was indeed the wonder that Sir Frederick had promised. Sea turtles and moray eels were present in abundance. I spotted several species which I had never seen before, and did my best to sketch them with the supplies the servants unpacked.

We were preparing to depart when Sir Frederick discovered something odd clinging to the rocks just above the water. It was leathery, about the size of a cantaloupe, and stuck securely to

the rocks. A piece of coppery metal, gleaming in the sun, appeared to have been thrust into it. The rest of the thing was nearly the same color as the rock beneath it, and difficult to make out.

Curious, I reached down to poke at it with my sketching pencil. I was startled when it abruptly changed color, flashing white and black patterns over its surface; but my astonishment increased when it peeled a tentacle away from the rock and pulled the pencil directly out of my grasp!

"Bloody hell!" Sir Frederick exclaimed.

The thing faded back to the color of the surrounding rocks, but its sudden shift had limned its boundaries for me. "It's an octopus, I believe," I told Sir Frederick. "Although I've never seen one quite like it."

"We must take it with us," Sir Frederick insisted. "I have an empty aquarium."

"Don't touch it. I have seen a species in Siam that is much smaller, but with a poisonous bite that can kill a man in minutes."

We debated methods of safely detaching the thing from the rock for some time. In the end, all of our discussion was rendered moot. We filled the small sample tank Sir Frederick had brought with seawater and held it up to the octopus, hoping to dislodge it and let it fall into the tank. We braced for a struggle, but as soon as the tank was in place, the beast dropped off of its own volition and settled into the water. It looked larger once inside, nearly the size of a man's head.

The octopus curled its tentacles in coils close to its body,

like a pugilist brandishing its fists. I could see then that it held the bit of reddish metal in one of its tentacles, as well as my sketching pencil.

"Is that copper?" Sir Frederick asked, squinting at the metallic fragment.

"Maybe bronze," I replied.

"I wonder if there's a shipwreck down there," he said.

The octopus struck the bit of metal and the pencil together several times, as if testing them against one another.

"Look," Sir Frederick said, "I think he's sharpening your pencil for you."

It did not take long, upon returning to Sir Frederick's estate, to determine that our find was not a normal octopus. Such creatures are usually reclusive to the point of near-invisibility. They even construct barricades to block the entrances of their hiding-holes. This specimen was gregarious and seemed to want to watch us as much as we wanted to watch it.

The thing also appeared to be missing a tentacle. Where an octopus has eight, this creature only had seven–and one was noticeably longer, with a tip that looked like a barb or a proboscis. I searched for the stump of an eighth tentacle as best I could from outside the aquarium, but I could see nothing. I was forced to conclude that it was an aberration, or perhaps a new species.

Sir Frederick's wife Lydia took an instant dislike to the creature. Even as we were evacuating it into the large aquarium,

she urged her husband to destroy it. She insisted that it was staring at her, that it wanted to escape and suffocate her. We ignored her irrational protestations and went about our work. Sir Frederick asked one of the servants to take her for a cruise on his yacht.

The octopus–or whatever it was–attacked and devoured crabs and other small animals in the same manner as a normal octopus. It sought with its tentacles, enveloped its prey with its amorphous body, and cracked the victim open with the parrot-like beak at its center. It had no compunctions about eating in captivity, and in fact displayed a voracious appetite.

After a long evening of observing the creature, we retired to our chambers. Late that night I awoke to a bloodcurdling scream. I ran out into the hall and found the Lady Smith collapsed to the floor, consumed by hysterics. Her own bedroom door hung slightly ajar, and she seemed determined to crawl away from it. She stared with terror back toward the bedroom. Bleary-eyed and half-asleep, I could not make out the source of her terror. I moved to assist her.

Just as I reached Lydia, Sir Frederick emerged from the bedroom, looking strangely calm and relaxed. He looked down at his hysterical wife with exasperated amusement.

"There you are, dear," he said. "Gave me quite a fright, you did." He reached down, retrieved something from the hallway floor, and raised it to his shoulder–

The breath left my lungs. It was the octopus. It settled comfortably onto Sir Frederick's shoulder, and draped a suckered tentacle lightly around his shoulders to hang on.

I was afraid to ask whether he had been addressing his wife, or the creature on the floor.

As I helped Lydia to her feet, I noticed a wet trail leading from the aquarium to their bedroom and back. Like any other octopus, the thing was clearly a master escape artist. With no hard body parts aside from its beak, it could flatten itself into invertebrate jelly and squeeze through nearly any crevice. With its suckered tentacles, it could easily travel up and down the walls, or across the floor.

Lydia's hysterics had not decreased, and as her husband approached she began clawing at me and emitting whoops of alarm as fast as she could recover her breath. Her eyes were round and staring, no doubt fixated on her husband's shoulder-borne companion. Sir Frederick seemed oblivious to the effect he had on his wife, and continued to approach with a vacuous smile upon his face.

"Step back, man!" I chastised him. "Get that thing back into its aquarium, and put something heavy on the lid. I'll take her... I'll take her outside for some fresh air."

"Good idea," Frederick said, smiling broadly. "She can sleep on the yacht if that's more to her liking." He turned and looked at the creature perched on his shoulder. "I don't know what all the fuss is for. The little fellow just slipped out of his tank and went looking for company. Nothing to worry about."

With the help of the servants, I successfully installed the Lady Smith aboard the yacht. She calmed down somewhat, but was not fully restored to coherence. I hoped that a few more hours of rest might help.

I returned to my room and drank whiskey from my flask until I could sleep. I did not want to cross to the other end of the hall. I thought that if I had to lay eyes on Sir Frederick again, with his slimy tentacled familiar perched on his shoulder like a grotesque parrot, I might begin to scream myself.

The next morning, the aquarium was gone.

I found Sir Frederick in the kitchen, devouring a huge breakfast of eggs and bacon as prepared by the servants. He greeted me cheerfully.

"Did you manage to get back to sleep, then?" he inquired politely.

"Eventually," I replied. "I saw that the aquarium was gone. I suppose the Lady Smith has prevailed upon you to dispose of your find at last?"

Sir Frederick wiped his mouth and pushed his plate away. "Oh no, not at all," he said. "I've just moved the aquarium into my room. The poor thing was quite distraught after its little adventure, you know. And quite dehydrated. Fine now, though. Nothing to worry about." He reached into his pocket. "Oh, but I did manage to retrieve your pencil. Not much left but a nub, I'm afraid. I think the little fellow ate it. I hope there's nothing poisonous in it."

I took the pencil. There was very little left, but I could find no clean breaks where it might have been bitten. "Perhaps something in the water caused it to dissolve," I mused.

Sir Frederick stood and placed his napkin on the table. "Well, old bean, I must go into town for supplies. You'll stay

here, won't you? I would hate to leave the wife all alone, after the scare she received." Before I could respond, he patted me on the shoulder and went on his way.

After Sir Frederick had departed, I attempted to visit the Lady Smith aboard the yacht. One of the servants informed me that she was resting, and could not be disturbed.

Then, curious, I returned to the house and tried to enter the master bedroom. It was locked. I went to the gate and asked the servant standing there if he could watch over the lady of the house while I briefly went into town. He shook his head slowly, and told me that Sir Frederick would return soon.

It appeared that, overnight, I had become a prisoner.

I did not want to force the issue, so there was little for me to do but wait. Sir Frederick returned that afternoon, but made no time to speak with me. He retired immediately to his bedroom. The servants brought a series of cloth-wrapped objects into the room after him. I saw the edge of one protruding from under its wrapping. It was a reddish-gold metal, much like the fragment our octopus had brought back in its clutches.

At dinner, I asked Sir Frederick where he had been.

"Just into town," he said. "Supplies, you know. Nothing to worry about."

"You didn't return to Devil's Hole?" I asked.

"No, no, of course not," he muttered.

In the days that followed, Sir Frederick emerged from his bedroom only to make more "supply runs." He sealed himself

in his bedroom most of the time. Strange sounds often emanated from within–usually the sound of a hammer striking metal.

I was not allowed to leave, nor was I allowed to visit the Lady Smith. When I brought up the subject of returning home, Sir Frederick always implored me to wait. He insisted that he would take me back himself, aboard the yacht. When I pointed out that the yacht was probably not a wise choice for a trans-Atlantic voyage, he waved me off.

As the week wore on, his supply runs ceased altogether. He only emerged to slip across the compound to the yacht, and even then he did so wrapped in a cloak and hood, his face completely obscured.

I asked one of the servants why his master no longer showed his face. “He is very sensitive to the sun,” was the reply.

One night I observed him sneaking off to the yacht with a servant in tow. I watched them from a window, wondering how long it would take them to reappear.

A ghastly moan floated back on the wind, raising my hackles. It sounded eerily like the moaning we had heard at Devil’s Hole.

I determined then that I had to escape. Observing that Sir Frederick was still aboard the yacht, I marched resolutely to his bedroom. This nightmare had commenced immediately after our capture of the octopus. Perhaps it was inflicting some strange fever on him. Perhaps if I got rid of it, he could begin to recover.

I kicked the door open with one blow, which surprised me. I have never been the sort of person to go about kicking doors open, and I never imagined I might be good at it.

As soon as I entered the bedroom, all pleasure at my successful entry vanished. I was struck with a crippling vertigo, and plagued with a sound like buzzing wasps in my ears. I fell to my knees and struggled against an urge to claw my own eyes out. My mind was rebelling against things it should never have seen, against deadly information delivered along my optic nerves.

Ceiling to floor, the bedroom walls were covered with writing. Nothing I could read; nothing I could even look upon and hope to remain sane. They were terrible glyphs, images curving into unknowable spatial dimensions, potent symbols invoking blasphemous names whose enunciation would shatter men's minds and reduce them to ravening animals.

All of them had been written with my charcoal sketching pencil.

I kept my eyes on the floor and staggered to my feet. I still had a job to do. Haltingly I made my way across the floor, until I felt my hands rest upon the cool glass of the aquarium.

I paused for a moment, unsure how to proceed. I could not lift my gaze very far without exposing my eyes to the writing covering the walls. Instead of attempting to search the aquarium, I rocked it on its base until it fell, barely managing to step out of the way in time.

I searched the floor carefully as water flowed over my feet, knowing that the creature could camouflage itself convincingly.

I carefully covered every square foot, but found nothing.

It had not been in the aquarium. Sir Frederick must have taken the creature with him.

Remembering that they were all still on the yacht, I knew that an opportunity had come to me. I ransacked Sir Frederick's drawers and cabinets. It had to be in there–

And so it was. At the bottom of one drawer, carefully concealed, I found a number of needles and tourniquets, and a large supply of morphine. Sir Frederick's numb cheerfulness, his obliviousness to the cut on his hand, and the marks on his arm all had hinted at his addiction. Here was the confirmation.

I hurried to the yacht, anxious to arrive before Sir Frederick finished with whatever grotesque errand had brought him there. One of the servants was standing guard. I approached him calmly, then drew his attention to the side. While his head was turned, I jabbed him in the neck with a syringe of morphine. I hoped it wasn't too much. I had never dabbled in opiates, and knew nothing of the proper dosage.

The servant turned back, alarmed; but before he could do more than take a step toward me, his eyes had rolled back in his head and his knees had given out. I had confirmation, at least, that I had not used too little morphine.

I crept through the ship, searching. Their whereabouts were not difficult to determine. Lydia's ghostly moans and howls echoed across the compound, and made her easy to locate. Soon I stood before a galley door, steeling myself to burst in.

Sir Frederick never gave me the chance. The door flew open and there he stood, cloaked and hooded. He tried to block

my view of Lydia, but I could see that she lay on a table just beyond him.

On the far side of the galley he had erected a strange contraption fashioned out of the reddish-gold metal. It was shaped like a large grasping hand, several feet across, with a blinding point of luminescence hovering just where the fingertips would converge. The room seemed to bend around it, as if its angles no longer met properly. It hurt my eyes to look upon it.

I felt myself gripped by an invisible force, and my feet lifted an inch or two from the floor. I floated toward Sir Frederick's cloaked form, unable to move.

"You are far too late, mud-grub," he growled at me. His voice was thick and slow. "Soon there will be enough of us to power the device, and Voullhata the Overlord will return to rule once more."

"Enough of what?" I asked him. "What are you?"

"We come from beyond the stars," he gurgled out. "We ruled this orb when your ancestors still scampered from tree to tree. For millennia I have waited beneath the waves for this opportunity. You will not stop me. Your era is done."

"Sir Frederick," I implored him, "don't allow yourself to become a pawn! Whatever dreadful influence this spineless monster may wield, you are a knight of the Empire of Great Britain! For the love of humanity, fight it!"

A horrible, gurgling laugh rolled out from beneath the hood. Sir Frederick grasped his hood and pulled it back, and I saw the mind-boggling countenance of the thing he had

become. There would be no breaking the alien monster's influence over him, not ever.

The creature had enveloped and devoured his head, and somehow... replaced it. Six of its tentacles waved toward me, and the seventh–the larger one, the oddly-tipped one–was thrust down his neck and fused with his spine. Somehow it had mounted itself smoothly atop his neck. There was nothing left of the man I had briefly known; he had been reduced to a set of bony struts draped with skin, kept intact to serve as the unspeakable monster's transport. He was a walking tide pool, a pocket of warm moisture for this thing to occupy in the midst of hostile territory.

Its watery eyes were open, glowing, glaring at me. A third eye had opened in the center of its mantle, and it shone green and malevolent. I was motionless under its gaze, a hare frozen by the stare of a wolf.

The alien advanced upon me, and still I could not move. It leaned forward, and still I remained paralysed, even as its tentacles wrapped around my head, and I could feel its foul beak press against my forehead, tensing to crack my skull like the rind of a melon–

But then the beak pulled away, and the tentacles fell aside, twitching and curling. The creature that had once been Sir Frederick sank to the floor, a freshly emptied syringe jutting from its back. Fortunately, its invisible grip on my muscles had faded as it concentrated on devouring me, and I had been able to dose it with morphine.

The thing clutched at the syringe with poor Frederick's

hand, and pulled it free. “What–what–?” it gasped, before its glowing green eyes were shuttered by unconsciousness.

“Nothing to worry about,” I muttered.

It was when I discovered what had become of Lydia that I determined my current course of action. She lay gasping and moaning on a table in that room, and when I saw her condition I knew that she was beyond saving as well. Indeed, her fate was the worse of the two, for somewhere deep in her mind there might have remained enough sanity to comprehend the unmitigated horror of what had been done to her.

I sailed the yacht out to sea. It probably was meant to be manned by a crew of three or four, but I was an experienced sailor, and had no trouble on my own. The trade winds carried me southwest, toward the Caribbean.

I administered all of the morphine to the two of them, hoping that it might kill them, but it did not. Soon I wished that I had saved some for myself.

As I began to write this, I could tell from the noises below that they were stirring. Whatever they are, the morphine is not as effective on them. The thing controlling Sir Frederick still lacked the strength to motivate his body, but even through the walls of the yacht it managed to speak to me, somehow projecting its voice directly into my mind.

Your plan is flawed, it whispered. Take me out to sea, sink me beneath the waves. It will not destroy me. I have lived in this sea for millennia, scavenging the wreckage of my vessel. I will remain here, calling from the murky depths. Your fellow

mud-grubs will be compelled to answer the call, just as this one did. They will join me beneath the sea, ship after ship, sailor after sailor. They will all die because of you, if you leave me here. And one day I will still find a way to return to the surface and complete my work. Turn back now, and I will see that you are spared. Carry on with your scheme, and this entire sea shall become my new Devil's Hole.

I squeezed my eyes shut and did all I could to block out its voice. My course was set; there could be no turning back now. If I delayed, Lydia's fate might be the doom of us all.

I thought of what I had seen, and the horrible images crowded out the whispers exhorting me to turn back. I saw her supine on the table, her belly hideously swollen. Nausea overtook me as I laid my hand upon her skin, and felt the hideous squirming beneath it. There were dozens upon dozens of them in there, tentacles writhing over one another, eager to burst free and inflict themselves on a world of unsuspecting humans.

The little fellow just slipped out of his tank and went looking for company, Sir Frederick had said. And so he had, and so he had found it. No wonder Lydia had gone so completely mad, so quickly. She had been violated beyond all human comprehension, her body used to incubate monsters from beyond the stars.

I conclude this letter now. I will seal it away in a bottle from the galley, in the hope that it will find its way to those better equipped to deal with its revelations. As for me, I plan to tip over the cask of brandy in the galley, and set it alight, and send us all forthwith to Hell together. I know no other way to

proceed. I can only pray that it will be enough to destroy the unborn creatures, if not their horrid father.

I do not know if the alien is telling the truth–if in fact I am leveling a curse against these waters, and sealing the doom of all the sailors who dare to cross this stretch of open sea southwest of Bermuda. I can only hope that this letter will serve to explain that I befouled this region in order to preserve the rest of the Earth from a far worse fate.

I go now, to finish the job.

Forgive me, my friends. Forgive me.

Space Freaks

by Carey Burns

Jimbo strolled in front of the wall of canvas, proud of his innate artistic ability to capture the sheer horror of the aliens in his sideshow. He liked to think of himself as a one man show in the sideshow world because Timmy, his brother, was mute and more than a little stupid, and the other actors just stood (or sat, depending on the costume) and did nothing. He surveyed the tents and trailers–the gob of chew in his lip turning his smile grotesque–and strutted through the tent flap into the unofficial space debris museum.

"Ti-mo-thy!" He raged, finding a flickering light above a chunk of melted iron and plastic, labeled as a piece of genuine spaceship shot down over Roswell in 1976.

Timmy shuffled towards him with his head lowered, holding up a replacement bulb.

Robbed of his moment to verbally slap his brother, he pursed his lips–brown juice oozing between the red flaps of skin–and spat at Timmy's feet. "You're lucky, you miserable piece of shit."

Jimbo stormed through a rear flap into the staging area, looking for a reason, any reason, to lose it on the actors. He stewed seeing as everything was fine, and balled his hands into fists. There was only one thing to do.

He stalked through a smaller flap into a tiny, dark room and

found his intended victim. Jimbo stood in front of the seated figure–its small, round head lolled to the side as if it were asleep.

"Hey, you!" He kicked at its legs. "I know you're awake, and I know you can understand me. I saw you trying to get free the other day–don't think I didn't see it. Now you're gonna' see what happens when you piss around with me."

The creature raised his head and blinked. His large, cat-like black eyes shined in the darkness. He looked like a wingless bat without ears. The alien sat bound to a wooden chair by a heavy metal winch rope. It gouged into his flesh, but he'd grown accustomed to the pain. With a raspy sigh he closed his eyes, waiting for Jimbo's wrath.

Jimbo sashayed to a wooden crate and plucked out a short metal bar. He flicked a switch and spit on the tip of the rod, listening to it sizzle. Satisfied, he drew closer to the alien.

"You're ugly." He punctuated the last syllable with a prod. "You're weak." He prodded again, pleased at the alien's reaction. "And you're never, ever, getting free!" He held the rod against the creature's neck, watching with glee as it convulsed and shook. Jimbo smiled and returned the rod to the crate. He left the tent with his hands clasped behind his back, feeling much better.

It was the last show in Joplin and then it was on to a couple nights in Springfield. They'd do a few one-nighters on the way to St. Louis, and then camp out for a full week of 'R and R' before heading into Illinois. It always seemed like the closer they got to a big city like St. Louis, the less people would come

out to see the freaks. The smaller towns were where the money was. People saw lights in the sky all the time and believed the show was real. They'd bet money on it.

Timmy waited until Jimbo had headed back to their trailer, and then he crept into the alien's tent. He barely made eye contact as he held up a glass of water with a straw in it. The alien blinked at him and nodded. He sipped, watching Timmy. HeIt had a sense about other life forms, and knew that this one was substandard, but had a kindness the other one lacked. He finished drinking and leaned back in the chair, shifting against the biting metal rope.

Tears welled up in Timmy's eyes as he watched the poor monster squirm. He darted behind the chair and took hold of the winch handle. As he turned it, the rope slacked, so that it no longer gouged the monster's skin. Timmy scurried to the back of the tent, rolled to the ground under the canvas, and into the fresh air. He breathed in deep, enjoying the freedom for a moment before Jimbo screamed his name again. With his shoulders slumped, he hurried to the front of the sideshow tents before there was Hell to pay.

"There you are!" Jimbo stood next to two men in dark suits, a manic smile on his lips. "Gather up the actors, Timmy. These here gentlemen–Agent Rollins and Agent Simons–want to see if we've really got aliens."

With a nod, Timmy darted into the tents and gave the high alert signal–he flailed his arms wildly above his head. The four actors knew the drill. They pulled out their costumes and

identification cards, and tromped out in single file for inspection. While they distracted the two investigators, Timmy hid the creature in the false bottom of the wooden crate. He pressed his index finger to his lips and gave the alien a pleading look to be quiet. The monster nodded to Timmy, who then secured the crate and scurried back out front, hanging close to the entrance flap.

The two agents studied the costumes and checked the actors' names against their notes from previous visits, but found only one thing amiss.

"Hey, there are five costumes here. Who is Batman and why isn't he here?" Agent Rollins steeled his gaze on Jimbo, waiting for an explanation.

Jimbo's smile faded. "Oh…him. We had a difference of opinions and he departed our company. My brother," he nodded toward Timmy, "dresses up as the fifth alien, or Batman, as you call it."

Rollins stared at the costume's small, round head and shiny black cat eyes and shrugged. "Seems like everything is in order. Mind if we look around, though?"

"Be my guest. You're welcome to stay for the show–on the house." Jimbo placed a fresh wad of dip in his lip and followed the two agents through the tents, explaining what the fake extraterrestrial items really were and how he made everything appear so real.

Satisfied, the agents headed to their dark sedan. Rollins called over the open car door, "Take care, Mr. Malone. I don't

think we'll be seeing you again."

Jimbo watched them leave and turned to find the troupe staring at him. "What are you all just standing around for? We've got a show to do!"

They made fistfuls of money that night, and after Jimbo had portioned everyone's share, he strolled back to the alien's tent, drunk on profit and whiskey. He leaned against the crate, fingering the rod.

"Your performance tonight was rather lackluster. Next time it might be in your interest to be a little more animated or I just might have to do something you won't like." He grasped the rod and stalked toward the alien, smiling.

Even before he could touch the electrodes to the alien's skin, it had wriggled free from the metal rope and placed both of its hands on Jimbo's temples.

"What are you doing?" Jimbo dropped the rod and fell limp in the alien's grasp.

The creature held him tight, and soon the two beings seemed to melt and reform into each other. The alien stared through Jimbo's eyes and smiled, releasing the Batman from his grasp.

The alien blinked, unable to speak as it tottered on its feet.

"Aw, what's the matter? Don't you feel so tough now?" His voice boomed through the tents. "Stupid, stupid human. Had you been kinder I may have thought to spare you, but now you will pay." He smiled and forced the alien to sit in the chair while he secured the rope around its arms.

"Want to see how it feels?" He hefted the rod and pressed it

against the alien's flesh, enjoying its futile struggle.

Jimbo chuckled as he dropped the rod on the crate. "That's just a taste. Your entire planet will suffer for your mistake."

He hopped onto the crate and sipped the whiskey, enjoying the sweet burn. "The destroyer should be here by sunrise and I'll get to go home, while your planet is blown to oblivion, but I'm keeping you as my little trophy. Oh what fun we'll have!" He laughed, watching as the alien blinked his big black eyes, unable to speak.

FUCK YOU, E.T.

By M. S. Gardner

It all started when I was watching an old zombie movie on television. At first, everything was going like it should–the undead were on their warpath, feasting on the flesh of the innocent, while others were holding up in a mall–but during one of the commercial breaks, everything changed.

After I discovered that there was a pill that could increase the size of my penis, a news flash came across the screen. I was never a fan of the news–it's always bad–so I changed the channel. The next station, a sports network, had the same message as the last. It was showing on every channel, and I was forced to watch it.

I'm glad I did.

I still remember the news anchor. Her name was Rebecca Wilson and she had to be in her late twenties. There is no way to describe her beauty. I'd seen her before, when surfing the channels, and she always seemed to catch my eye. However, this time was different. Instead of undressing her in my imagination, I found myself fixated on what she was saying. I will never forget the look on her face. Rebecca's eyes were watering and her voice monotone, but stern.

"To all who are watching this, I cannot stress enough–this is real. No hoax. No practical joke. This event is as real as it gets."

My television switched from her to another camera–footage being shot by a citizen in Seattle. I couldn't tell what it was at first, until the camera came into focus. When it did, I saw what I never thought I would. The sight reminded me of a fleet of starships I've seen in the movies. Some were circular, where as others took a shape similar to a skyscraper. They kept appearing, and in a matter of minutes I had counted over forty-five of them.

I could hear Rebecca speaking over the footage.

"These video feeds were taken just twenty minutes ago, around four-thirty. There are now reports that more of these things are arriving all over the world."

Then the television cut out, same with the power. I walked to my living room's bay window and looked out. To my horror, they were there, hovering in the sky. I couldn't even begin to count how many I saw, I was so scared. I stood there for what must have been half an hour, just watching them. In my daze, my thoughts ran wild. I still couldn't believe it, though evidence was right in front of me. It just didn't click–until they mobilized.

They spanned out quicker than my eyes could keep up. One of them–about the size of the Sears Tower–stopped over my neighborhood. I took a closer look outside and saw that others had stopped miles away. It was as if they had each been assigned a quadrant or something.

Seeing this, my first reaction was to grab my shotgun and pistol. It was clear that something was going to happen, and I wanted to be prepared for anything. There was no way of

telling what was occurring in the rest of the world. No preparations, no instructions, and no help.

For the next few hours I sat crouched beside the window, gazing at the sky. The more I watched, the more intimidated I became. My imagination had got the best of me.

Then it happened–the towering spaceship descended into a park not three blocks away from my house; seconds later, a bright, white light shot from the top of it, spewing smaller, circular ships.

After they left my sight, I heard a succession of explosions. I just about pissed my pants. I'm surprised my grip on the shotgun didn't leave an indentation. The sounds of screaming filled the air, followed by more explosions.

Earth was being invaded.

I ran to my room, slammed my door, and hid in the closet. It was the only thing that came to mind. My brain hit a mental impasse as I became frozen in a state of fear.

I truly believe that my infatuation with firearms saved my ass that night. I fell asleep, sitting down, with the shotgun leaning beside me and my pistol in my lap. I awoke to the sound of the back door getting kicked in.

A weird smell lingered as one of those bastards entered, almost like ammonia and bleach mixed together, just not as pungent. I heard the footsteps getting closer, and as the door to my room creaked, I slowly pumped the shotgun. I couldn't see it, but it was there–in my room.

They communicated through various-pitched grunts, their vocals strange and offsetting, almost as if there was an echo. A

stream of light lit part of my room and swayed from corner to corner until it shone on the closet. I heard its approach and backed up against the wall with my barrel pointed at the door. When the door flew off of the hinges, I fired.

There was a high pitch squeal and I fired again, sending a spray of pellets at whatever was in front of me. I blindly shot my remaining three rounds, then dropped the shotgun and extracted the pistol.

I heard a heaving sound coming from the room. Once it ceased, I exited, nearly tripping over the thing's corpse.

I grabbed the flashlight from the top drawer of my dresser, which I stored in case of emergencies. My curiosity was killing me. I couldn't wait to get a look at one of them.

This thing was ugly. For feet it had–what I guess you could call them–tentacles with little pod-like protrusions on the bottom of them. The legs were brown with white specks, bending like those of a kangaroo. A band of spikes encompassed its waist and shoulders. It had long, skinny arms with seven, branching appendages that I assumed were its hands. Sizing the corpse of the alien up, I guessed that it wasn't much taller than seven feet. Its head was the same shape as a human's, but the mouth was elongated and full of fangs, not teeth, fangs. I counted at least three rows of eyes and a set of spikes at the top of its head. With the knowledge that these things weren't immortal and conventional weapons could dispatch them, I regained a small amount of confidence.

I could still hear some of my neighbors screaming for help. The one thing I don't remember hearing was the sirens of a

police cruiser or an ambulance. It was a good indication that things had to be going down the shitter fast.

More explosions erupted as I exited my house in the morning. The sky was filled with plumes of smoke from the smoldering remains of the city. The tower-like spaceship hadn't moved. In the distance a horde of the aliens swarmed, acting as if they had found someone and ripped them apart–just like that movie I'd been watching. There was a quick scream and then I saw body parts flung into the air. What happened next, I feel, scarred me.

The things fought over the limbs of their victim as they devoured them; I couldn't believe it. One of them saw me and let out a wail that reverberated in my spine. The others then saw me, and gave pursuit. I did the only thing I could think of; I ran. I didn't know where I was going, but I just kept on my way.

Eventually, a side street that led to the woods came into view, as did several more creatures. I was being chased in two directions, and they were gaining on me with every passing second. I only had twelve rounds left for my shotgun and reloaded while I ran. Five shells went in, and five casings ejected not long after. Two of the things dropped, but the others persisted.

As I reached the woods, one of them shot a blue burst of energy at me. It missed, hitting the ground with a small explosive blast, and nearly knocking me off my feet. Then more shots came, some of them hitting the trees. I took off between them as they fell to ground–nearly toppling me–but I

didn't slow down. I just kept on running.

When I could continue no further I stopped behind a huge oak tree and caught my breath. I peered around the base of the tree and found that I had lost them. Not a single one of them was in sight. The woods had taken me to the other side of the neighborhood, which led to a small business district. Once I met the end of the tree line, I crawled on the ground across the backyard of someone's house. The sliding glass door was shattered and I could see bloodstains on the wall that led further inside.

I crept to the side of the house and crouched behind a trash can. From there I was granted a decent view of the street ahead, and had arrived just in time to see a few of them turn down another road. I ran as fast as possible to the business district, finally coming to a halt behind a pawn shop, where I took a few moments to collect myself.

Something that can only be described as a huge, roach-like arthropod was flying around with someone in its grip. My head cocked and I looked in amazement as it ripped the person apart, and swallowed their head. To see a "roach" hunting humans hit me in a weird way. Being that my profession was in extermination, I couldn't help but feel like it was karma punching me in the gut. The voice of a young girl brought me back to reality. I turned to see her and a group of others at the back door. Accepting their invitation, I entered the store.

Inside I met nine other survivors. The young girl introduced herself first, as Beth. There were three teenage boys–Carl, Edward, and Johnny–that were playing with some

instruments from the wall. An elderly woman named Clara sat behind the counter and the owner of the pawn shop and his wife–whose names I never learned–were going over the weapons they had. The final two were police officers named Cole and Daulton.

I entered into conversation with the two officers and discovered that the power had gone out in the entire tri-state area before the attack. The speculation was that "they" had caused it. The entire world was under siege from these creatures, or so they said.

The owner's made a rough estimate on their ammunition. The officers planned on fighting these things and were very pleased with the announcement. Cole said that almost everyone was dead and the government couldn't handle such a widespread attack by themselves. It made sense, and I was glad that I wasn't the only one thinking about fighting them off. Clara was too old to fight, but everyone else was ready. Her decision was to spend the last moments of her life reading a good book. We thought it best for Beth to stay behind with her.

That afternoon we prepared for our assault, the two police officers taking charge of the operation. The plan was to head to the police station two blocks away and requisition better weapons and transportation. I emptied two boxes of shells into my back pockets. My front ones were filled with .40 caliber bullets–thankfully I had my belt on. I also grabbed two extra pistols.

After everyone was equipped, we waited for the moment to be right. We didn't want to bring any attention to the store, for

the sake of Clara and Beth. Daulton and Cole watched through the blinds of the front door until none were in sight. We said our goodbyes to Clara and Beth, then left, making our way to an alley across the street.

I never saw those two again.

From there, we ducked behind abandoned vehicles, dumpsters, anything available. When the police station came into view, we saw a massacre–the street was soaked with the blood of the deceased, limbs scattered across the road, half-eaten. Gunfire poured out of the open door to the station. Cole took off with us following behind, but before we could get inside, we were attacked.

Cole reached the entrance, and one of the blue energy bursts collided with him. He was blown to pieces in an instant. I looked around, but nothing was there.

Another blast hit near the building. We scattered, desperately seeking cover anywhere we could. Edward and Carl ran into the middle of the street with guns ablaze. I never understood why, maybe they saw something that I didn't.

Two alien "roaches" swooped down from the sky, practically from out of nowhere, and ripped them limb from limb. One of their arms dropped next to Johnny. He panicked and ran down the street, quickly falling out of sight. I haven't seen him since.

Daulton, the other two, and I took cover in another alley, which shielded us from their fire. Daulton stood guard at our entrance point, and I patrolled the opposite end. We were sitting ducks, and there wasn't much I could do about it, until I

saw it.

I took my shotgun out, pumped it, and turned to the officer. I told him to follow me and darted into the street. An abandoned SUV sat with its doors wide open. I jumped in the driver's seat and the rest followed my lead, filling the vehicle in seconds.

We left as soon as the tires caught traction, but didn't get very far–I should have known better. The vehicle was shot, and we were sent tumbling into a ditch. As my door was torn off, my vision faded.

I awoke inside one of their containment chambers. My naked body shivered from the cold, stale air. It was like an air conditioned coffin. There wasn't much room, but I managed to dislodge the door. I fell to the ground and cowered in the fetal position until I warmed up a little.

Finally, I struggled to my feet and took in my surroundings. The two who owned the pawn shop were resting next to each other, in a chamber similar to mine. I tried to let them out, but the doors just wouldn't open, no matter how hard I pulled and pushed. Both of their facial expressions gave the impression that they were dead. I wonder if that's what I looked like.

Daulton was in a seperate chamber, three to the right of mine. His was different from all the rest, the outside adorned with nine squares in rows of three, each with a different symbol in the middle of the unit. I knocked gently, but had no success in reviving him–not that there was much I could do other than that. In the hopes of freeing him I hit several of the buttons,

and when I hit one of the symbols shaped like a backwards “Z”, a yellow gas filled the inside. Daulton’s eyes widened and his mouth let out a scream that was silenced behind the barrier. He fell backwards, motionless. I shrieked and backed away.

Looking around, I noticed a path lit with an amber hue. It went in two different directions. I had no idea where to go, but after possibly killing Daulton, I did not want to stay here. I chose to go right–there was a faint pinging sound in the distance.

I walked down the narrow, winding path until I reached a door, which slid open when I stood in front of it. Inside was like nothing I had ever seen before. The room was shaped like an octagon, with a table in the center, and above it, shiny, sharp objects were suspended in the air. All around the perimeter of the room were floating lights. In the background– behind the table–were vials containing mixtures of colored fluids sitting on a shelf, each with foreign markings.

I walked up and grabbed a vial of fluorescent orange fluid–its texture was like slime. The door behind me opened and, without hesitation, I ran to a dark corner and hid as best I could. The floor was so cold, but I managed to distance that thought–I had to.

Two horrid creatures entered, neither of them could have been taller than four feet. These one-eyed, chubby monsters smelled like feces, and I had to hold my hand over my mouth to keep from throwing up. One of them walked right by me and rummaged through the vials, for what I assumed was the one firmly in my grip. In my haste I had forgotten to return it. I

guess it must have been important, for the miniature beast slammed one of its three upper appendages on the shelf, spilling a rainbow of fluid to the floor as it communicated with the other. Again, its description could only be that of a grunt.

When they left, a red liquid mixed with another, and smoke started to rise. I looked closer and saw that the mixture was eating through the floor. Thinking that it might come in handy, I decided to keep the vile in my hand.

From the room opposite of the one I was in, a womanly scream arose. I gave my room another once over, but couldn't find another exit than the door I came in from. I sat there fearful for my life, contemplating my options.

I mentally weighed the implications of the situation. Earth was probably destroyed, and I had been abducted, but one question kept coming to mind. Why didn't they kill me like they did the others? It was painfully obvious–as more screams erupted–that I wasn't the only one that had been taken. Maybe they were keeping us alive to breed. After all, I saw several people meet their end by being eaten alive.

The thought lit a fire inside.

I decided that I must continue with Cole and Daulton's plan. They had attacked us first. It was only fitting that I repaid the favor, and as far as I knew, they didn't know that I was missing, yet. I could only assume an alarm would have gone off if they did.

I left the room, but all of my surroundings were unfamiliar. I let curiosity lead, following the pinging sound. The corridor eventually lit up, leading to an open hall with two doors on

either side.

As I walked to the first one, I noticed there was some sort of scanning device installed, barring my access. Then I heard a masculine scream from inside. There was nothing I could do but continue exploring. The next door opened as I stepped in front of it. What I saw when I stepped inside appeared to be a human figure shrouded in darkness. But when my eyes adjusted I noticed it was one of them, a humanoid. These things took so many forms. Before it could signal any of its comrades, I ran and threw the vial. The glass shattered across its face, and I watched as the substance started to melt through its skull.

In mid-run I leaped and extended my bare foot. The creature fell to the ground making a helpless clicking noise. I brought my heel down in a stomping fit until the thing was completely still. The fluid that left its body was bright green in color.

As the door closed, separating us from the hall, I noticed the cadaver gripped something in its right hand. It was some sort of alien pistol. On the side of it was–from what I could fathom–a charge reader. It shone the same bright green as the corpse's fluid, and instead of a barrel, it had three prongs with a ball on the tip of each. The trigger resembled my pistol's trigger, and it felt comforting in my grip.

The room was filled with several other containment units, three of them holding occupants barely resembling humans. I left in a hurry, before one of them could awaken. I knew it would only be a matter of time before something discovered the trail of clues I was leaving behind.

I entered the hall and saw that the room across the way offered me a survivor. For some reason the door was left open, and I entered with such ease it felt too good to be true. But what else could I do? Much to my surprise, it was Rebecca from the news. I would be lying if I said that I never imagined her naked, but never like this.

She hung in mid-air, head sloped, brown hair covering most of the top of her nude form. Her hands were bound to a hook which was attached to the ceiling, and her bright blue eyes met with mine and started to water as I made my presence known. I helped her down within seconds.

Her body was cold and showed signs of shock; the complexion of her skin was paler than I remembered. For the next few minutes, I rubbed her body against mine, warming us both. Thankfully I was able to suppress my urges, controlling what I had to have control over, at that moment.

After a few minutes Rebecca spoke. She told me the aliens had infiltrated the news station, taking her and several others hostage–the rest were brutally murdered, some eaten. The aliens that Rebecca described were different than any I had encountered.

How many types were there?

When she was able to move, we continued. I took the lead and walked into another corridor, identical to the one I had previously traversed. As we searched for… anything, the pinging sound grew louder by the moment.

Our path forked. The left would take us toward the commotion. The right led to a bay door that split vertically in

the center. We decided to go left, fearing that the right would lead us to our doom. The barely lit hall ended with a door, which opened, ending the pinging sound.

There were prisoners trapped inside three cells, guarded by an invisible barrier. One of them had a pipe in his hand and leaned against the wall. I searched until I found a terminal. From there, I was able to deactivate the containment field. Ten more survivors stood before us, all clothed. They offered some of their clothing, and we graciously accepted.

I cannot remember all of their names, but one named Ray stood out in particular. He said that he had been on the ship before the invasion, that they had performed experiments on him; he was their guinea pig. His story was unbelievable, until he shared that after every trial he woke up naked. A weird feeling came across me.

Did they…?

Ray said he knew his way around the ship and remembered how to get to their armory. Apparently they gave him a fucking tour or something. His intent, as was mine, was to fight the creatures. It was a good reassurance in that desperate time.

He told us we needed to travel past that big door Rebecca and I had seen earlier to get to it. And when it opened, several of the survivors started to throw up. I couldn't blame them. This place served as a cafeteria. Human limbs were strewn about dozens of tables. The reek of death brought tears to my eyes.

Three doors lined the walls, and we went through the one to the far right side. It led down another narrow hallway. As

the door to the armory opened, the loud beeping of an alarm sounded. We were panicked, but managed to keep control of our emotions. We had to.

Inside the room was a plethora of weapons I had never seen–other than the pistol in my right hand. Along the right wall were multicolored rifles coated in slime. To the left sat various pistols with different barrels attached to their ends. Some were small with antenna-like ends, while others had square barrels encircled with orbs. On the back wall rested blue, red, green, and black "grenades".

We armed ourselves and left. Ray led us farther down the hall. That was when we ran into a horde of the four foot tall creatures I'd seen in that room with the vials. I took one of the red grenades, pulled the pin, and tossed it. In the air it flattened into a wide circle and then dropped, covering several creatures. Their figures were discernable, but underneath its shroud I could only assume they were slowly disintegrating.

The others opened fire; streaks of white filled the air. Ray was the first to die. We retreated into the cafeteria and took cover. I counted seven of us at the time.

When the aliens came rushing through the door, one of the survivors threw a green grenade. It hit the ground and released a piss-yellow gas that irritated our attackers. We opened fire while they were distracted, and it became an extended fire fight. White strikes passed by, going right through the walls behind us.

A black grenade flew through the air and exploded between two of the survivors. When the smoke cleared their lifeless

bodies became visible, skin still melting. A blue grenade collided with the floor in front of the aliens, there was a bright flash of light, and they disappeared.

The alarm was still in full effect. Knowing another attack was imminent, I led the others to where my journey had begun. The owner of the pawn shop and his wife were still motionless in their chambers, but Daulton's was open and empty. A dragging sound came from a farther area that was unknown territory. The path was dark–I could barely see the floor ahead–and slowly something approached.

We hesitated until the figure was visible. As it left the shadows, I was amazed and at the same time horrified to see that it was Daulton. Well, it looked like him–only he shambled forward with one of his arms bent across his chest.

His movements were without consideration as he stumbled over his own feet and fell to the ground. Instead of standing, Daulton crawled towards us. Rebecca tried to talk to him, but he only flailed around, reminding me of a zombie.

He reached my feet and I was able to see a gaping hole on the back of his head. Despite his condition, I felt relieved knowing that my carelessness hadn't killed him. He was already dead, he just didn't know it. I put him out of his misery. That was no way for a man to live… exist.

At the end of the dark corridor was a single door. I couldn't decipher the writing on it, and it wouldn't budge. To make things worse, we could hear more of them approaching from behind. We backed away and I threw one of the black grenades at the door. The explosion left a small blast hole on

the lower left side.

Just as the enemies arrived, Rebecca and another woman made it through the opening. I shot a few of the alien creatures before following. None of the other survivors made it.

The woman was panicking. Rebecca tried to calm her, but she was crying, too. The room was empty with no way out, but I wouldn't give up–something inside me just wouldn't let that happen. I told the women to wait in the room–that I would come back for them. Rebecca was dumbfounded. I smiled and crouched next to the hole.

Before they came out of the shadows, I pulled out the antenna pistol from the waistband of the shorts one of the prisoners had given me and aimed at the darkness. I did a quick search for a safety or cocking mechanism. There was a small lever where the hammer would be on a revolver. I pulled that back and squeezed the trigger. A stream of light blue shot out from the tip. I held the trigger until the weapon started to vibrate.

The wails from the injured brought more of them. I ducked through the hole and ran to one of the corpses. A blue grenade and a new weapon lay next to one of its appendages. This thing looked mean. It was shaped like a shotgun, spanning three barrels. It had three switches on the fore stock, and a sight attached to the barrel–for long ranged attacks.

As more showed up, I experimented with the switches. The first shot out orange disks that cut through anything in their path, bouncing off the corridor's walls and chasing the darkness, leaving several dead in their wake. The second one sent out a shockwave, which only knocked the enemy off of

their feet, but served as a great way to blast through the wall at close range.

I shot through several rooms before I made my stand. Then, I flipped the third switch. The gun charged with an increasing winding sound, and I waited for the first to arrive. When I pulled the trigger I was thrown off of my feet. I heard the explosion before I could see it.

Switching back to the shock wave rounds, I moved to assess the devastation. There bared little resemblance to the creatures I was shooting at, mainly grisly remains of their horrid form. Satisfied that it was safe, I returned to the women.

It took a minute to calm both of them down, but we finally made our way deeper into the ship. Both of the girls armed themselves with weapons from our previous assailants. We eventually reached a room that gave me the opportunity to silence the alarm. One shot with the shockwave blast ensured it wouldn't be a problem any longer, the computer or device spawning it completely destroyed. We continued until we reached what seemed to be a lab. In the center sat four cylindrical tanks, each containing a human. They were all mutated a little, deformed.

They floated in what appeared to be water, with masks covering their mouths. As we searched the room, one of them awoke from their slumber, broke free from its tank, and pounced on the woman. The flowing fluid from the chamber brought back memories of the odor that had accompanied the bastard who'd tried to get me in my room. The person–or whatever it was–bit her neck and ripped through her jugular. A small wave of blood shot out. Rebecca shot it first, the blast sending the creature flying

into another tank, causing it to crack and inevitably break.

A second creature rose to its feet and lunged for me. I flipped the first switch on my gun and cut it down in three shots. Its head fell off and landed inches from my feet. I looked over at Rebecca. She was even more beautiful with a gun in her hand and a serious look on her face. Then her expression changed to one of pain. Her eyes opened wide and she dropped to her knees with blood seeping from her mouth.

When she fell over I saw a humanoid that had three red eyes and a swarm of tentacles flailing behind it–one of them holding her heart, blood dripping to the floor. Its voice sounded like a collection of whispers.

I looked at Rebecca and felt my heart drop to the floor. Though we didn't really know each other, we had a bond that not many did.

"Rebecca," I said as her head tilted in the same fashion as when I found her.

I looked at the humanoid and raised my firearm. It asked me why I continued to fight, telling me that it was useless, that what happened on Earth was only the first wave of their attack. It said that they have bigger plans for humanity.

I had enough of its talk, and flipped the second switch.

"See you in Hell, you son of a bitch."

The gunfire knocked it off balance and I flipped on the third one. While the gun charged, I dodged its jabbing tentacles. Once charged, I fired, and was knocked off of my feet again.

I wasted no time in getting back up. Instead of basking in the glory of killing the creature, I blasted my way through the

ship until I found their storage of escape pods.

On my way I passed through a room with egg-shaped sacs attached to the ceiling. I was disturbed by the sight of something reaching out from one of them; I didn't stay to see what would emerge. I also noticed an open door with a bright source of energy streaming to the top of the ship.

The door to the pod opened and I started to press random buttons until the thing started up. A beeping came from a speaker above the single chair inside. The sounds grew gradually softer. I assumed it was a countdown.

I ran back to that energy source and flipped the third switch on the gun. It charged, and I fired. Regaining my balance, I ran back to the pod just as the entry door started to shut. There was an eruption of explosions as I strapped myself in, and I was ejected into space.

Minutes later, the very ship that held me hostage blew up. Many died, human and alien alike. But death had to be a better option for those people.

It was a crazy trip. I saw many other ships in the distance– some of them seeming as big as the moon. Besides the countless enemies, space was a wonderful place with an indescribable view of the Earth. Eventually, I was able to navigate the pod and managed to make my way back home, miraculously without any conflict. I guess the rest of those bastards thought that I was one of them.

They were wrong.

As luck would have it, I survived the crash. I ended up

here, in Las Vegas. There are more of those things coming. Believe me, I have made it my purpose to fight for our survival, until the day they kill my ass.

I dare to say we're outnumbered and that they have much better weapons and odds. However, there is one thing that they lack–the human spirit–and their underestimation of it will be their downfall.

My name is Harry Parker, and I ask you:

What will you do?

Will you stand by and surrender your life to these tyrants? Or will you fight with us, and make these fuckers regret that they ever stumbled upon our planet?

We Dream in Aquamarine

Kody Boye

Aquamarine swam over his vision like the slowly creeping luminescence of pool water. At first, he wondered how he could've possibly gotten out back, right near the frat's pool. Then, he remembered that he had a bad habit of falling asleep outside. In his disoriented, half-asleep state he saw three figures standing around him, garbed in cloaks and funny, big-headed masks.

"You guys are assholes." He chuckled, raising a hand to flip off his fellow fraternity members. "Here I am, sleeping outside, while you're standing there dressed up like you're ready for Hallo–"

Ashton stopped speaking when one of the figures stepped forward. Donovan (the biggest man he'd ever met) had to be hidden under that grey-headed, black-eyed mask. None of the other guys stood six-foot-six.

"Come on, Don. Leave me alone–or at least help me up."

He pushed his hand forward and waited for Donovan to grip it. When Donovan didn't, Ashton groaned and threw himself back on the lawn chair. "Go away if you're just going to stand there."

The other two figures stepped forward. One held up a long, three-fingered hand, each of the joints swollen to excess. The tip of his finger reminded Ashton of some extraterrestrial from

an old Disney movie. With that finger, the second figure–whose eyes seemed larger than its companions'–pointed at Ashton's stomach, and then pushed it into his abdomen.

"Fucking A!" Ashton screamed while kicking. "Leave me alone!"

An excruciating pain lit up his right side. He howled and moaned, kicking at the figures with his left leg because his right was hurting badly.

"Go away!" he screamed. "Go away! Go awa–"

"Shit, man," Donovan said, shaking Ashton's shoulder. "You take some good shit or somethin' before you went to bed?"

He opened his eyes and found the African-American there smiling. His green eyes seemed out of focus.

"You're asking me if I took something." Ashton laughed. "You're the one who looks stoned."

"Shh, man. Don't go tellin' the world."

"You sound like a Jamaican who's having a good time on his boat, dude–I don't need to broadcast it."

"Whatever."

Throwing his legs over the side of the bed, Ashton reached up to run a hand across his face, and came back with a handful of sweat. He'd expected worse–possibly Sharpie or some other kind of marker. The guys often played pranks on whoever fell asleep first.

"Want to tell me what you were dreaming about?" Donovan asked, now swaying in place. "You were telling me to leave you

alone."

"You and some other guys were dressed in big masks and staring at me out back, by the pool. One of you poked me."

"Poked you? Man, you must've liked that."

"Shut the fuck up and go smoke whatever you were smoking."

"I got some more if you want some. Seriously, man…I do."

"I'm not about to go to the burger joint stoned. I have a job to think about."

"You don't have to think about any'thin if you get a lil' stoned."

"My point exactly."

After running his hands through his hair and making his bed–per fraternity rules–he made his way to the dresser and opened one of the drawers, scrounging for some clothes. Thankfully, his uniform stayed at work. He didn't need the guys to make fun of him for working at a place which had a chicken as its mascot.

Could be worse, he thought, stepping into the bathroom. I could be the chicken. God, did he feel sorry for the poor bastard that had to do that.

After kicking his briefs off and tossing them in the corner, he stepped into the shower and turned the water on. Soon after the water came on, the door opened.

"Hey, hey!" he said, turning to find Donovan standing in the doorway. "You mind?"

"You mind, man?"

The African-American jumped onto the counter. Ashton

figured he would've fallen off, given the way he was swaying, but somehow he managed not to.

"I don't mind anything," Donovan said.

"Just don't mess with my underwear."

"I'm not queer."

"Yeah, but you were the one who put itching powder in them."

"What can I say, I like pulling shit on you guys."

"Yeah, I've noticed."

Gathering a bit of shampoo into his hands, he did a quick hit and mix on his hair, then scrubbed under his arms and privates. When he was finished, he stepped out of the shower and dressed from the waist down before examining himself in the mirror.

"You look fine, Ash. It's not like you have to look good selling burgers."

"I do if I want a date."

"With what? The chicken?"

Then, Donovan did fall off. It didn't faze him much, because he was on the floor rolling with laughter.

"Yeah," he said, and then smirked. "At least I've got a job."

"I had a job too."

"Then you got caught smoking pot. You're lucky your ass didn't get thrown in jail. Bet the big, tough guys in there would've liked a piece of you."

"You're an idiot."

"You're stoned."

Donovan didn't reply.

"Anyway…" Ashton said, raising an arm to apply deodorant, "I'm going to work, so give me a minute."

"Hey, hey! That's my deodorant!"

"Yeah, but I don't have any more–so shut up."

"You better watch out, bro. Don't make me do something to you."

"You will anyway."

After pulling his shirt on and adjusting it across his chest, Ashton tossed the mini stick at his friend before walking out the door. He could have sworn he'd heard the guy call him something under his breath.

He stood at the front counter ringing up an order for a family of six, that couldn't seem to get what they wanted right.

"Three cheeseburgers," Ashton said. "One without pickles, one with extra pickles, and one with nothing but ketchup."

He tapped that into the register, hoping they wouldn't change their minds again. "One double with everything on it, one quarter-pounder with just cheese and tomatoes, and one chicken salad with extra bleu cheese sauce. How many orders of fries did you want?"

"Four large," the mother said.

"And four large." He nodded, accepting the woman's change. He slid it into the cash register and reached down to grab six large drinks. "Thank you."

The woman, her husband, and their five children went to sit at a table out back.

"You managed to get all of that?" Blake–another of his fellow frat mates–asked. "I sure as hell couldn't."

"Yeah," he sighed, scratching his stubbly cheek. "I did."

"May God be with you, buddy."

He flipped Blake off before the guy disappeared to make burgers.

Taking the opportunity to relax at the end of a busy lunch rush, Ashton leaned against the counter and tallied how many people he'd served in the past ten minutes. Though, he lost count more than twice, Ashton figured that he'd taken at least fifteen or sixteen orders.

I swear, if I don't get a raise out of this…

He would 'leave the business.' Of course he would–he said that all the time, but it meant jack shit in the long run. "Oh well," he muttered, easing away from the counter. "That doesn't mean–" A sliver of pain punctured his side.

"Shit," he said, reaching down to feel if he'd accidentally run into something. "That's fucking–" Another throb punctured the silence of his body. That was my right side, he thought remembering the dream, and this is…

"My right side." He lifted the tail of his shirt up. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

I'm overreacting. It's just a cramp.

A new customer stepped up to the register and examined the menu, completely ignoring Ashton and the way he'd lifted his shirt. She stood there for a long moment before clearing her throat.

"What can I get you?" he asked, sweat breaking out under

his arms.

"I'll have a cheeseburger…" she paused, waiting for him to enter the order in, "with a side of small fries and a soda, please."

"Thank you." He gasped, inhaling a deep breath. "That'll be three-fifty."

"Are you all right?" The woman frowned. "You don't look so–"

Ashton had no time to hear her finish. He crashed to the ground, rolling in pain.

"What's going on?" Blake asked, running out to see what had happened. "Hey, Ash…what's wrong? Why are you on the floor?"

"My side's fuckin' throbbing," he moaned, trying as hard as possible to not move.

"It hurts that bad?"

"Yes, you fucker."

"Hey, hey…I'm just wondering what's–"

"What's going on out here?" the manager asked, stepping forward. "Ashton, why are you–"

"My side started hurting," he said. "I need to go home."

"You can't go home," she began. "We're in the middle of a lunch rush."

"You're going to be in the middle of a lawsuit if he kicks the bucket," Blake said, bending down and sliding a hand under Ashton's side. "Come on, bud. I'm gonna' take you home."

"Please, just let me lie here."

"It's not that far to the car. I promise."

"Please…"

"You gotta' help me on this one, Ash."

Giving in to his friend, he rolled over onto his knees, grimacing at the pain. Tears drenched the surface of his eyes, breaking the dam of his lids before flowing down his face.

"There we go," Blake said, helping him to his feet. "Just lean on me, buddy."

Ashton did just that, trying to avoid the eyes of everyone in the restaurant, as Blake led them out of the building.

"What's up with him?" Donovan asked.

"Fuck you," Ashton said.

"He had a little accident at work," Blake said, gesturing Donovan aside. "He needs to lie down."

"What happened, man? You fall and stab yourself with a knife, burn yourself with grease, slip and–"

"Shove my foot up your ass?"

The black man kept his peace and moved out of their way. Blake half-carried, half-dragged Ashton into the bedroom and then helped him remove his shoes, shirt, and belt.

"All right," Blake said. "Where does it hurt?"

"What the hell are you going to do about it?" he groaned.

"Uh… I am studying to be a doctor."

Smartass, he thought. Then, gestured to his side, right above his hip.

"This is where your kidney is…" Blake frowned, applying a little pressure. Ashton groaned in response. "Have you been drinking a lot of soda or something?"

"No."

"Have you ever had a kidney infection before?"

"I don't think so."

"It might be best if you just stay in bed and get some rest, then. If your kidney is hurting that bad, I don't think you should be walking around."

"I can't walk anyway, dumbass."

"Come on, Ash–don't be like that."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Because I carried you all the way out of the restaurant and back here."

Trying to fight back more tears, Ashton closed his eyes. He knew that he looked like the biggest baby. "I'm sorry." He sighed, setting an arm over his eyes. "It just hurts."

"I bet it does," Blake said. "Just get some rest. Donovan'll be here if you need anything."

Like he'll do much. "Thanks, Blake."

"No problem. Get some rest–I'll explain everything to the boss." Blake patted his arm a few times before he went out the door.

An hour or so later the pain had almost diminished, though his side occasionally throbbed when he moved or changed positions.

"You okay?" Donovan asked, knocking on the doorframe before leaning into the room.

"I feel better," he sighed, taking a deep breath. "Man…I must look pretty bad."

"You look worse than me, and I'm stoned."

Ashton couldn't help but laugh.

Donovan grinned and took a few steps toward the bed. "You need anything? Something to read, eat, drink?"

"You can get me a glass of water, if you want."

"I will. But, hey…sorry about earlier. If I had known this was going to happen, I wouldn't have been an ass."

"Thanks, but you don't have to apologize. I was being just as big an ass as you were."

"Bigger…" Donovan chuckled, leaving the room before Ashton had the chance to retaliate.

While waiting for his friend to return with the water, he closed his eyes and tried to think of what could've given him a kidney infection. Yeah he liked high-sugar pop, but he didn't drink it by the gallon. He hadn't run into anything–at least, not that he knew of. Maybe he had rammed his side into the diving board screwing around with the guys, or maybe he'd fallen out of bed and cracked his side on the end table.

Whatever I did, he thought, it sure doesn't feel good now.

"Here."

He blinked. Donovan had returned with the water. "Thanks," he said, tilting his head slightly to get a drink. "Did Blake ever come back for lunch?"

"I don't think so. He's probably making up for that lost time on his lunch break."

"You're probably right." Ashton sighed, handing the glass of water back. "I shouldn't have been such an ass."

"You can't help it. Your side's fucked up."

"Let's just hope it doesn't stay that way."

Donovan nodded. "You need something else?"

"No." He sighed. "Thanks, Don."

"No problem. Just holler if you need something."

He would do just that.

The following day–after Blake had checked on him and left–Ashton slid out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. Though his side protested with each and every step, he had to go–no matter the cost.

Pushing the bathroom door with one hand, he leaned against the wall, took a deep breath, and then fumbled with his fly. After it was undone, he pulled himself out and walked into the bathroom.

The minute he started to relieve himself, a fireball exploded in his urethra.

"Fuh-uck," he moaned, leaning against the wall. "Come on."

He fought to relieve his bladder for the next few minutes, despite the pain and the unbearable agony. Soon enough the urine stopped coming, but the pain persisted.

"What the hell?" he said. "What just happened?"

He stepped back to examine what had taken place.

Blood filled the inside of the toilet.

Unable to bear the sight before him, he fell to his knees, and stared at the bloody water through a haze of tears. He wanted to yell for Donovan to call a nurse, to find out what had happened, but he couldn't muster the ability. Just the sight of

the blood made him squirm.

Then, something moved in the blood.

Forcing his eyes shut to clear the tears, he leaned over the toilet, watching the thing inside. What looked to be a small, black object–about the side of a bead–swam along the edge of the pool, propelling itself along with a pasty-colored tail.

Oh…my…God.

"Donovan!" he screamed. "Donovan!"

The thing inside the toilet stopped moving, spun in a complete circle, then lifted out of the water to meet him. Its black 'head' stared for several minutes before it dove under, disappearing from sight.

"Donovan! Hurry the fuck up and get your motherfuckin' ass in–"

"What's wrong?" the man cried. "Why are you–?"

He stopped speaking when he looked inside the toilet.

"What the fuck…?"

"Something came out of my dick," Ashton sobbed.

"That did?"

"Yes! It did!"

"It's all right, bud. Calm down. It's okay. You were just seeing things because there's so much blood."

"No I wasn't, Don. I wasn't."

"Shh…" Donovan said, turning Ashton's head away. "Shh…"

The man reached forward and flushed the toilet.

"We're taking you to a hospital," he said. "Now."

"Well, Ashton. It seems like you've got what appears to be a urinary tract infection, along with a mild kidney infection."

"Mild?" Donovan asked. "You call pissing blood mild?"

"Considering he could have kidney stones, yes–I'd say mild."

Ashton cursed under his breath. Donovan had a bad enough habit of spouting shit off when sober–he didn't need to draw extra attention. Though his eyes weren't completely out of focus, they wandered the room when they should have been set on the doctor.

"I think I might have some kind of parasite," Ashton said. "Something came out when I went to the bathroom this morning."

"When you urinated?"

Ashton nodded.

"What did it look like?"

"Like a black bead with a tail."

"Hmm…" The doctor frowned. "What happened to it?"

"It disappeared in the toilet."

"You flushed it down?"

"No," he said, glancing at Donovan. "It… it rose out of the water, looked at me, and then swam under the blood. I didn't want to reach in and grab it."

"I really don't blame you, Ashton. I'll take a blood sample now–but I'd also suggest urinating where you might be able to catch the specimen, like in a cup or jar. That way you can bring it in for further examination."

"I'll do that, sir."

“Have you been any place where you might’ve picked something up? A park, a dirty stream–visited a foreign country?”

“I haven’t been anywhere like that,” he said. “How could you catch something at a park?”

“You know the sandboxes kids play in? You can get tapeworms out of them.”

“Fuck,” he said.

Donovan gagged.

“But no, I haven’t been anywhere like that.”

“All right. Give me your arm. We’ll get some blood and send it off to the lab.”

“How’d it go?”

Ashton looked up to see Blake sitting in the living room.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ve got a kidney and urinary tract infection.”

“And a parasite,” Donovan added.

Ashton elbowed the man in the gut.

“A parasite?” Blake frowned, rising. “What?”

“I woke up this morning and peed blood,” he said, leaning against Donovan to reduce the pressure on his side. “After I nearly passed out, I saw something swimming in the water.”

“What are they going to do about it?”

“They’re running a blood test.”

“You mean you didn’t catch it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

"Because it disappeared under the bloody water. I was too upset to try and catch it."

"I don't know what to tell you," Blake said. "Sorry, bro."

"Yeah, whatever." Ashton turned to Donovan. "Are you going to just stand there, or help me into the bedroom?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"You're damn lucky you didn't get pulled over," Blake said, sliding an arm across Ashton's back and gesturing Donovan aside.

"If you're so worried about him, then you take a day off from work," Donovan said. "I can't help it if I'm stoned."

Yes you can, you dumbass.

"Thanks, Blake," he whispered.

"No problem. You want your shirt off?"

"Just my shoes…if that's all right."

Blake bent down and pulled both sneakers off, then gestured for him to lie down. "What'd he say to do about the parasite?"

"He said to pee in a cup or a jar, and then bring it in if another comes out."

"You think that's going to happen?"

"God, I hope not. That sure as hell didn't feel good."

"The doctor said you had a urinary infection, right?" Blake asked, waiting for a nod before he continued. "That might explain why it hurt so bad to go to the bathroom."

"My dick was on fire."

"Well, yeah…urinary tract infections do that. Trust me, I

know."

"And how would you–"

"I got an STD from an old girlfriend. Needless to say, I went through two weeks of hell afterward. That's when I started wearing condoms."

"Anyway…" Ashton sighed. "Can you go get me a water bottle or something?"

"Do you have to go to the bathroom now?"

"No, but it'd be nice to have a drink."

Blake smiled, despite the sarcasm that had rolled from Ashton's mouth.

"You take it easy, all right?"

As if I have anything better to do, he thought. He waved Blake off before his friend could leave the room.

Ashton lay in bed, hoping the nausea had come from thinking of something living inside of his body. Outside the room, rap music pulsed from the twin speakers that sat in the living room, right below the flat screen plasma. Though, it didn't particularly bother him, he would've preferred it off. At least with the music going he didn't have to worry about overhearing one of his frat mates talking about him.

Earlier, the half a dozen other guys he shared the building with–Scott, Billy, Gerard, Quince, August, and Tanner–had come in and started badgering him, both about the doctor visit and keeping his strength up, since he'd opted not to eat the dinner Blake had brought. He hated the attention, but the guys cared.

They told me at least one of them would be there to make sure I was all right.

That excluded Donovan, who would be running out of his stash. August had made sure that Donovan had 'smoked more than he thought.'

He chuckled, thinking…that's Don.

A pulse at his side stopped his thoughts. "Blake!" he called. "Can you come in here for a second?" Someone turned the music down. He yelled again.

"Yeah?" Blake asked, leaning in the doorframe. "You need something?"

"Can you bring me my pills?"

"I hope you know, they'll knock you out."

"Better than listening to shitty rap music."

"I'll tell the guys to turn it down."

Ashton rolled his eyes, knowing Blake wouldn't. At least he's tolerable.

While he got along with Donovan pretty well, most of their conversation was limited to either mindless prattle–which ranged from what girls they'd done, or wanted to do, to which class they needed to catch up in–or drugs. Donovan liked to talk about everything he'd smoked or snorted, which got old after a while.

Ashton was drawn away from his thoughts when a knock came at the door.

"Got it," Blake said, holding two capsules up. "It says to take this before bed with a glass of water."

He swiped the bottles and the glass of water out of Blake's

hands before he could say anything else. He popped the pills into his mouth and tilted his head back. After downing the whole glass of water, he set it on the end table. "Night," he said.

"Night," Blake replied, walking out of the room. He closed the door behind him.

Movement brought Ashton out of his drug-induced sleep. It didn't come from around his bed or anywhere in the room. It came from underneath his skin. After sitting up so fast that the pain flared up in his side, he padded his midsection–swearing he could feel something pressing against his skin.

"Ah fuck," he moaned, looking around the room to where the other guys were sleeping. "Just fuck."

When none of the others woke to his protests, Ashton threw himself down on the bed, regretting the action soon after. His side screamed bloody murder and the action forced a soft squeal from the depths of his throat.

Come on, you big baby.

Come on…come on? He laughed, because he couldn't come on even if he was forced to. His side–which had been fine just moments ago–throbbed like it had a few days before, after he'd come home from the burger joint.

Why does this have to happen to me, of all people?

He was the nice guy–the one who worked and got along pretty well with his frat mates. He was the one who didn't play pranks on the guys, or toilet paper the surrounding houses right off campus. He, of all people, did not deserve to have a parasite swimming through his blood and wreaking havoc in his

stomach.

The same slimy feeling slid across his abdomen. He slapped the skin, coming in contact with something more than muscle.

“Oh, fuck...”

An indent the size of an olive stood out above his belly button. What he knew to be a tail convulsed below, slapping against the upper layer of his skin like fingers on the rubbery exterior of a balloon.

“Blake,” he said, raising his voice so his friend could hear. “Blake!”

“What?” the man moaned.

“It’s… it’s in my stomach.”

“What?”

Blake threw himself out of bed and was at Ashton’s side before the parasite could stop convulsing. It then disappeared under the surface of his skin.

“Fuck, Ash.”

“Fuck is right, you fucking idiot!”

“We gotta’ get you to the hospital. That wasn’t an itty-bitty parasite.”

“What’s a hospital going to do for me, Blake? Flush it out, jab me with needles, play whack a mole when it comes out for a peek?”

“No,” Blake said, taking a hold of his hand. “They’ll inject glowing dye into your blood to see where the thing is.”

Lying in a dark room with a stinging sensation right below

his elbow, Ashton looked around the room. An ultraviolet light strip hung over his body, highlighting the dye as it steadily worked its way through his system.

"Hang in there, Ash," Blake said, gripping his arm.

"That hurts, man."

"Sorry."

After drawing his hands away, Blake crossed his arms over his chest and looked at the doctor and nurse. The nurse–who'd injected the dye into Ashton's system–turned and looked at something on a piece of paper. Ashton could barely see her eyes scrunch in wonder, as she stared through her special sunglasses.

"What'll you do when you find it?" He frowned, finally asking the question he'd been holding back for the last few minutes.

"That depends," the doctor said, setting a hand on Ashton's shoulder. "Depending on its size–we'll most likely have to rush you into surgery."

"It's as long as my hand," Blake said, holding up his appendage for emphasis. "How else are you going to get it out?"

"We could kill it with antibiotics," the nurse said. "But that would require you to go into the ICU."

"Why would I have to…?"

"The drugs can do some pretty heavy-duty stuff if we're not careful."

Great. Just great.

"What else might you be able to do?" Ashton asked, hoping for another alternative.

"We could," the doctor began, "try to excise while you're awake, but considering it's actively moving, I don't see how we could do that."

Thank God.

Blake chuckled. "They're taking good care of you, bud," his friend said, clapping his shoulder. "Don't worry."

"There it is," the nurse said.

"Turn the light off!" the doctor cried. "Quick!"

With the ultraviolet light off, the creature could be clearly seen traveling up the length of his left arm. It stopped at his shoulder to examine something, before sliding into his chest, right below heart level.

"We need to get you into surgery," the doctor said, gesturing for the nurses to bring a gurney over. "It's too close to your heart."

"Everything's going to be all right," a new nurse said, setting a breathing mask over his face. "This is anesthesia, Ashton. It's going to make you very, very tired. Don't try and fight the sleep, all right?"

"All… kay."

As the nurses and the doctor rushed him out of the examination area, into the hall, and toward the emergency room, Blake ran alongside him, whispering that everything would be all right and that nothing was going to go wrong.

The color aquamarine swam over his vision, enticing a state of fear that started at his heart and extended into his brain. His hands–knotted from hyperventilation–lay on his chest, one

set over the other, as if he were meant to be buried.

Three figures stood around the long, metal table he laid upon, raising long-fingered hands and gesturing in signs that Ashton couldn't understand. The tallest turned, carrying a jar in its hand. It spoke in a language completely foreign, but somehow familiar, before setting said jar near Ashton's head.

A creature–black headed and long tailed–swam in a transparent green substance, striking the glass with its head, attempting to break away from its confine.

"Human," one said in a deep voice, somehow lacking physical sound. "You are the mother."

Mother? He wanted to ask, but couldn't speak.

"Mother." The thing nodded, raising its hand. Its three fingers gripped his face–the largest and most bulbous resting between his eyes, while the other two gripped his cheeks, right along his highest cheekbones. "You, give birth, to our kind."

Blake stood alongside the medical doctors as they made a Y-incision from Ashton's chest down to his stomach. Garbed in scrubs and a mouthpiece, he watched as the fleshy insides of his friend became visible. In less serious circumstances, he would've thought of how close they were going to be after seeing Ashton's insides, but now wasn't the time to be joking around.

"What can I do?" he asked, looking at his medical professor.

"I'd prefer you stay back and watch–if anything. We're about to remove the parasite."

"Where is it, though?"

Before, it had been just below the heart, but it seemed to have disappeared.

"There," another doctor said.

With a bloody index finger, the woman pointed out the parasite that had been plaguing Ashton's body for days. It wrapped around a lung like a starving snake to a kill. The head rested near one of the outer tubes that pump blood to the breathing vessel.

"All right, team," the lead doctor said. "You know what we have to do."

All ten heads in the room nodded.

Blake swallowed a lump in his throat.

A nurse–keeping eye over the surgery from a distance–stepped forward with a small, handheld power saw.

I don't think I can watch this. Regardless, Blake made no move to back away, much less abandon his friend in his time of need. "Come on, Ashton," he whispered. "Be strong."

The moment the screaming, revolving blade hit the right side of Ashton's ribs, the monitors spiked. An anesthesiologist backed away as blood flew out of the chest cavity.

Somehow–whether by chance or miraculous luck–the parasite made no attempt to move. Instead, it simply continued to rest, no more than a few dangerous inches from the blade's rotating edge.

Blake almost told the doctor to be careful. It would do more harm than good.

After a section of rib was removed, two doctors stepped

forward holding small clamps. One doctor slid his hand in and grasped the lung to hold it steady, while the other clamped down on the parasite's olive-sized head.

"Be ready to catch it if it gets away," the doctor said.

His companion nodded.

With no more than a slight tug, the parasite came off of the lung.

"That's it?" the head doctor asked.

Blake could imagine his mouth hanging open under that piece of plastic.

"Seems so," the extracting doctor said. "Someone get this thing in a cup and run it down to the–" The parasite convulsed, flying from the clamp that had once held it.

"Get it!" someone cried.

Blake grabbed a nearby jar and made a running dive, catching the thing before it could slide under the ER door. It twisted and squirmed, writhed and wreathed, but could not get out of the human's strong hold.

"Got you, fucker." With that, he dropped it into the tube of water and secured the lid. Behind him the doctors talked with one another on their next action. Unsure of what to do, Blake simply stood there and watched the scene unfold.

"We need to take his infected kidney out," one man said.

"And his gallbladder," another added. "If it's a parasite, it could have laid eggs."

"You're right." The head doctor sighed, looking over at Blake. "Son… I don't think you want to see this."

"Is he gonna' be all right, sir? Will he be okay?"

"He'll be fine, just…just go."

Closing his eyes, Blake muttered a soft prayer under his breath before he left the ER, carrying the parasite with him.

Blake and the rest of the fraternity sat in the waiting room, hoping the doctors would come out and tell them everything was going to be all right. Just after he'd dropped the struggling parasite off at the lab, Blake contemplated calling Ashton's parents, but decided it would be best to wait until his friend came out of surgery.

But what if he doesn't? He dared to ask himself. What if he dies and you didn't tell his parents that his last moments were like…

"Blake?"

"What?" he asked. Gerard–a guy with a mess of red beard–had asked the question.

"You all right, man?"

"I'm fine," he said.

Blake seemed the worst off–except for Donovan, who was half-past stoned and bawling his ass off.

"Shh!" August hissed, smacking the back of the man's head. "You're going to get us thrown out!"

"But he's my brother, man," Donovan wailed.

"He's our brother too, but we're not bawling our eyes out."

Just when Blake thought everything would start going to hell, a doctor came out with a grim expression on his face.

"Yes?" Blake asked, before the doctor could even say anything. "Is Ashton all right?"

"He's stable," the doctor said. "He's just had his right kidney and gallbladder taken out."

"Are you putting them back in?"

"No."

A lump that had developed in Blake's throat disappeared with a nervous swallow. "What happened?" he asked.

"The whole inside of the kidney was filled with eggs, and the gallbladder was… well, it was better off gone anyway."

"So he never had an infection at all, then. The parasites did it."

"No–he had an infection, but the parasites didn't help any."

"He's going to be okay, though…right?"

"Yes. We're just putting everything back together and fixing up his ribcage. He should be out of the OR in a few minutes."

When Ashton came out of the OR, Blake and his fellow fraternity stood outside the recovery room, watching their fallen friend through a glass window. Donovan had since mellowed out, but only because August had threatened to steal the rest of his drugs.

"He'll be okay, guys," Blake said, looking over his shoulder at the seven men that stood behind him. "The doctors got rid of the infected areas and have him on antibiotics to kill any they might've missed."

"They couldn't have gotten into his other kidney, though… could they?"

"They said there were no parasites. They ran a test, I guess.

But even if there are parasites in there, the drugs will kill them."

"Guess it's a good thing I didn't let him be, huh?" Donovan asked.

Everyone turned to look at Donovan, whose eyes had since cleared up. Whether he'd sobered was debatable.

"You did good, Don," Blake said, slapping his friend's arm.

"Yeah," August said. "You're a hero, you know?"

"I'm no hero." Donovan chuckled. "I'm just a strung-out junkie who's barely making it through college."

"You're a hero," Blake said, wrapping an arm around his friend's back. "Right, guys?"

"Right," they said in unison. Together they wrapped Donovan–and each other–in a group hug and prayed for their friend's recovery.

Aquamarine didn't swim over his vision the next time he opened his eyes. Instead, Ashton saw a white ceiling, with what looked to be large snowflakes imprinted on its surface. His first–and only–instinct was to summon a nurse or doctor, which he did with the help of the button resting under his thumb.

"Hey, Ashton," a young nurse–possibly no older than Ashton himself–asked. "You holdin' up, bud?"

"Holding up isn't the word to describe it," he said–voice hoarse and rough. "Am I okay?"

"You had your kidney and gallbladder removed last night. Does anything hurt?"

"It feels like a big chunk of my right side is missing."

"That's expected." The nurse reached out and adjusted an

IV tube before setting his eyes on Ashton. “Do you need anything?”

“A glass of water–if I can.”

“That’ll work just fine. No soda though, sorry.”

“I don’t think I’ll be drinking anymore soda after this.”

“Probably for the best.”

With a chuckle and a smile, the nurse turned and walked out of the room, leaving Ashton to himself. For the next several minutes, he closed his eyes and tried to piece together everything that had happened over the last few days. First the dreams and the three-fingered figures, followed by his ‘kidney infection’ that dropped him at work, and then the parasite that came out when he’d urinated that fateful morning.

Good thing I went to the doctor. Ashton figured he would’ve died had he not. A knock at the door brought him out of his thoughts.

“Hey,” Blake said, leaning into the room. “Knock, knock.”

“Come in.” He smiled.

Blake smiled, too, and slid his hands into his pockets.

“Where’re the others?” Ashton asked.

“They were here most of the night, but I told them to go back to the house.”

“You stayed here all night?”

Blake nodded. “Yeah, I did.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I care too. Donovan was even bawling–though he was pretty much stoned out of his mind.”

“That’s Don.” Ashton chuckled.

Blake walked closer to the bed, fell to a knee, and set a hand on Ashton's arm, taking a deep breath before expelling it.

"You're out a kidney and a gallbladder now," the man explained, "but the good news is, they've gotten rid of the parasites. They've got some medicine running through you that'll kill anything else that might be in there, so you'll be here at the hospital for a few days."

"Did they find out what was inside me?" Ashton asked.

"They…they said they can't find anything in their database that matches what you have."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know, Ashton. I really don't know."

Ashton closed his eyes and turned his face toward the ceiling, remembering the dream that had started it all. We dream in aquamarine, he thought, reaching out to grip Blake's hand. And forever… they will sleep.

Blind Encounter

by Pete Mesling

The Project, as Franklin Holmes had come to think of his latest obsession, was a multimedia art piece in the early planning stages. At the center of it was going to be a sculpture of a man, tormented by paranoia, inspired by various artifacts ensconcing him: a television set playing only commercials, a computer in a crashed state, and a winged creature from some plutonian shore. These, and more items he had yet to work out, would hang about the paranoid figure from heavy wires. He already had a couple of galleries interested in seeing photographs of the finished work, but before he could begin in earnest, he had to be sure that he captured perfectly the terror of his subject. And to do that, he would need to understand how paranoia worked.

He'd started his day at one of the local branch libraries, but the reference librarian there assured him he'd have better luck at the university's science library. He wouldn't have borrowing privileges, but he could use their resources and make copies-of the odd article. And they were sure to have more materials pertaining to chronic paranoia in their collection than the city's system could offer.

By the time he'd parked at the university and trekked across the sprawling campus–only to discover there was a much closer lot–he had a more pressing concern than the long-term

effects of paranoia.

"Excuse me," he said to the young man working the information desk of the H. Seldon Science Library. "Could you direct me to the men's room?"

"Yeah, sure. It's good you asked, actually. The restrooms on this floor are out of commission. You'll want to take those elevators–" He pointed across the lobby. "–down to the basement level. Hang a left out of the elevators and follow the long corridor till it ends. Turn left again, then take your first right. You'll see a short half flight of stairs going up at that point. Take those and go through the door at the top–the yellow one, not the red one. It gets stuck, so put your shoulder into it. Anyway, once you're through the door, go left, right, and left again. The men's room will be on your left. Can't miss it."

"You're joking."

The man simply looked at him as if he'd been slapped.

His bladder wasn't about to put up with a repeat of that litany, so Franklin pretended to have memorized every drop of information the man had spewed and headed for the elevator.

When the elevator doors opened onto a narrow corridor with exposed plumbing and structural beams all along its length, he wished he'd pressed the fellow one more time. Getting lost could turn out to be more time-consuming than a second run-through of the complicated directions.

Aside from feeling that he wasn't supposed to be amid the library's dumpsters and cleaning equipment, getting to the restroom wasn't so bad. If anything, the staffer's instructions had been too complete. He pushed open the door. It was dark

inside, so he groped for a switch. Light revealed a small anteroom, designed for god-knew-what purpose. There was nothing in the room but a row of coat hooks on one wall. He tried to imagine a situation in which more than one person would need to hang their coats in this forsaken dungeon. Nothing came to mind as he pushed his way into the sanctum beyond.

Here he encountered more difficulty locating a switch. He was about to let in some light from the door that had closed behind him, sealing him in a pitch-black chamber of unknown dimensions, when his fingers found the switch on a wall perpendicular to the door. He gave it a flick and almost emptied his bowels. A man stood less than three feet away, gazing absently past him.

Before the fluorescents could twinkle and pop to a steady flow of hard light, Franklin switched them off, as if the action might also send the man back to whatever lightless world he hailed from. A childish instinct, but it had the instantaneity of a reflex. Also just as it had been impossible to quell the reflexive urge to turn them off, he now felt powerless to turn the lights back on. In the interminable moments that passed as he tried to find the courage to throw light on the stranger once more, he grew certain that no other world had claimed the man after all. His smell persisted, for one thing–not disagreeable, but distinctive. It was musky and sweet, like an overheated flower. The stranger's breath hissed between his teeth at regular intervals.

It was the stranger who finally broke the silence. "Is

someone there? Why won't you say anything?"

An odd question. course someone was there. Surely they'd both seen each other, but then more details flooded Franklin's mind from his brief, involuntary assessment of the man. His eyes were closed eyes under razor-straight bangs, wearing a Gonzaga sweatshirt and matching pants. The cane was there in the man's hands. The tell-tale white cane of a blind man. Relief washed over Franklin, and he switched on the lights without a trace of his former fear.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," he said lamely. "You gave me a bit of a scare. Do you need help or anything?"

"No, I was just making my way to the sink. Thank you."

"Oh, okay. Let me get out of your way."

Franklin finished at the urinal before the blind man was done at the sink. He skipped washing his hands, wanting to be out of the dreary basement before doomsday.

"Sorry again if I scared you," he said on his way out.

"You didn"t," the blind man said, still running water, his head bowed.

The way back to the elevator felt unfamiliar, but he made it without any backtracking. The call button flickered when he pushed it, couldn't seem to hold a steady current. He hoped the elevator itself ran on a different circuit. His shoe had come untied, and as soon as he stooped to retie it, the elevator announced its arrival with a ding. The door clattered open as he finished his knot.

"Going up?" someone asked from within.

"Where else would I–" Franklin looked up into the face of the

blind man. But that was impossible. Not likely that they'd both be blind and wearing the same clothes. They were pulling a fast one on him, but why?

He got to his feet and stepped into the elevator as nonchalantly as possible, deciding to play along for now. Slowly the door jiggled closed, and the car rattled up to the main level.

Franklin sensed trouble as soon as the door opened to reveal the library's lobby. Something was wrong. A wash of sun pressed in through a frontal bay of windows, gray and smothered, like autumn light before a thunderstorm. But this wasn't autumn. It was summer, and there hadn't been a cloud in the sky when he arrived at the university. No rain in the forecast, either.

But stranger than the lack of good light outside, was the absence of any artificial lighting inside. The place was completely devoid of patrons, too, and the young man working the front desk was nowhere to be seen. Franklin took one step out of the elevator, then another. Was there a connection, he wondered, between all of this happening while he was at the library to research the long-term effects of chronic paranoia? Who had he told about the Project? Maybe someone who knew what he was working on was having a go at him.

Rounding a corner, he saw what must have been the main stacks and a row of catalog terminals. All dead. A low howling came up out of nowhere and soon filled his head. He jerked around, trying to pinpoint the source of the noise. It was no use. The sound seemed to be coming from everywhere, though not

at once. One moment he was sure it was emanating from the farthest corner of the stacks. The next, he thought the source might be in the lobby behind him. It was a din of screeching and monstrous chuckling. Franklin fell to his knees, covered his ears, and squeezed his eyes shut.

To his amazement, the cacophony ceased. He let his hands drop to his sides, his eyes flutter open. Before him, several stacks farther down the hall, stood the blind man, tapping his cane in a crisscross pattern he might have used while crossing the street. But he wasn't moving, just tapping the cane and smiling a little. Franklin would have noticed if the man from the elevator had passed by him. Yet if twins were unlikely, triplets were downright ludicrous.

"What the hell do you want?" Franklin hollered. "What's going on here?"

The man pointed behind Franklin with his cane, eyes still shut tight. Franklin craned his neck, but only saw what appeared to be a large shadow clinging to the far wall. It slithered into an even darker patch. When he turned back around, the man was gone.

Something appeared suddenly between rows of books, but vanished as quickly. Had Franklin imagined that it had hooked pincers for arms and concentric circles of slobber-dripping teeth lining its throat? Had it really been tall enough to rest its foremost claws atop the stacks as it rolled its glassy black compound eyes in his direction? Had it all been the play of shadows?

He had to know, though each step he took toward the aisle

where the thing had shown itself was leaden, resistant to his will.

As he turned into the narrow aisle, the creature shrieked, squatting so that its horrible maw was directly in front of Franklin, large enough to take him in whole. The shriek grew in intensity. Franklin's own howls of response drowned in the ocean of the thing's keening. He knew in that instant, what it would be to die of fright. He was very close to the brink.

A hand on his shoulder, pulling him back from the reeking monster, hurrying him down the hall, through a door and into a chair.

"Listen to me," the blind man said. "I don't know why or how, but you've evaded transference."

"What are you …" Franklin decided shaking his head was as eloquent as anything he could hope to say.

"You weren't supposed to be here. The basement must have cut you off from the extraction field. I can't go over all the details, but if you've ever had monsters under your bed or in your closet, that's what we're up against here. Only these bad boys don't wink out of existence when Mommy turns on the light. They're drawn to places where man's greatest accomplishments can be felt. Where he has come closest to the divine, they're sometimes able to slip through. The collection of materials in this library must agree with them. It's the closest we've come to understanding their motivations, anyway. No one knows for sure. But they've been breaching the barrier between our world and yours with greater frequency lately.

"I need you to stay here. They may ride in on the waves of

humanity's best inclinations, but they'll only be driven out by force. I've sensed two here today. I can handle two. Been fighting the bastards for a long time. But I can't brook any distractions. If they stick around long enough, they become permanent fixtures of your world. They're gathering strength as I tell you this."

"Then go!" Franklin screamed, utterly convinced, despite the insanity of it all.

As soon as the blind man was gone, Franklin rushed to the window of the small conference room he'd been deposited into and watched. "Your world" the man had said when referring to Franklin, and "our world" when referring to himself and the creatures. It made sense, considering the guy seemed capable of appearing wherever and whenever he liked. Of course he wasn't of this realm. But what kind of world was it that expected a blind man to do battle with such monstrous brutes? Franklin hoped the library was as close as he'd ever come to the shores of that region.

Like seasoned predators they came, one from somewhere amid all those books, the other from the lobby. The first one clicked and jabbered in all of its insect glory. But the other one was different, slinkier. Its body must have been made of a thousand flexing segments, and as it came up behind the blind man to trap him, it raised the forward third of its wormy physique almost to the ceiling and let loose a hiss that was an even match for the bone-rattling cackle of its cousin.

Franklin wondered which one the blind man would take on first, and what he'd use for a weapon. Surely not the cane. The

man surprised him by flattening himself against the end of one of the stacks and lifting both hands to the air, one of them still gripping the cane. The creatures scrutinized him, waited patiently for him to make the first move–almost as if they were amused.

Franklin realized in that instant that the Project had taken a detour. It would still reflect the dark, struggling corners of the human mind, if he lived to see it through, but it would include the three figures that stood before him, locked in a tableau of deadly potential. Gone from his mind were the television set, computer, and demon. He had all he needed right here. He ran his eyes back and forth over every detail of the scene, wishing desperately for a sketchpad.

It was when the blind man dropped his jaw impossibly low and tilted his head back, thrusting out his chest, that Franklin returned to the dangerous reality of the situation. The creatures began to thrash and wriggle in place. Some kind of blue-gray energy thrummed in outline around them. The field gathered force, and tendrils spooled out from each monster, met midway, and sent a shoot directly into the blind man's elongated mouth.

The library was soon awash in the hazy light of the exchange. Franklin had both hands flat against the window. He was rapt as he watched the energy pour into the man's trembling body. The foul things connected to the man were shrinking. But it wasn't the neat, superimposed shrinkage from an old science fiction film. These things were being drained of their life essence, leaving behind shriveled husks like the molted skin of a copperhead.

When it was over, two wrinkled exoskeletons collapsed to the floor, and the last wavy threads of energy seeped into the blind man like water into a dry chamois. His head came down hard, and his knees buckled. Franklin feared the man might fall, but he managed to stay upright. Franklin rushed to his side.

"Good god, what just happened?" He placed a hand on the man's shoulder. It radiated heat. "Are you all right?"

The man nodded, breathed heavily, and worked his jaw to its original location. "It's over. For now. My people will need to find a new conduit soon. I'm growing too old for this."

"There are so many things I'd like to ask. I don't know where–"

"Eh? What's that you say?"

Franklin spoke up. "I wish I could know more about your world."

"Settle for this. Every time I absorb one of these nightmares, my senses are diminished. You can see that I've already lost my sight. My hearing will be next. My faculties will eventually go. The people I take orders from know this, but they don't care. It's more efficient to use me until I'm as spent as the remains of these two." He waggled his cane to indicate the felled beasts. "That's the world you're so curious about. Leave it at that."

"This isn't your true form, is it?"

"No, of course not. You wouldn't be able to make any sense out of what you were looking at if I didn't disguise myself whenever I visit this world. My appearance would drive you out of your mind."

“How do you get back?”

“I open a door using the energy I just swallowed. It’s the only way. If I don’t succeed on a mission, at least partially, I don’t return. I’m sorry you had to witness this.”

“And these carcasses?”

“They’ll come with me. They need to be counted, logged, and burned.”

“Why are your people so concerned about our welfare?”

“I might as well tell you. It’s not like anyone would believe any of this if you passed it along. But then I really have to be going. My people are not concerned with your welfare, by and large. The Jaceti–these shriveled creeps–are planning an overthrow of your world. With control over this realm, there’s no telling what kind of war they might wage against us.”

“I should have guessed that self-interest was at the bottom of it. I have a feeling our worlds have a few things in common.”

“I wouldn’t expect to see any more of me, or the Jaceti, if I were you. If you do, it won’t be good.”

The blind man pressed his hands together, the cane held firmly between them. A blue nimbus gathered along his fingers.

“What’s your name?” Franklin asked while he still had the chance.

The man uttered something long and unintelligible. Franklin nodded and backed away. Blue light dripped from the blind man’s fingertips and began forming what truly appeared to be a door. When it was whole he looked exhausted, but managed to address Franklin one last time.

“Perhaps I was wrong in apologizing for making you see

this. Maybe I should be sorry that more of your kind will never get the chance. The greatest accomplishments of your people come at a potentially high cost. Here, today, it was books that drew the Jaceti across. Tomorrow, who knows? A museum, a Gothic church, a classroom? Maybe you would do well to treat these things as though the Jaceti are coming, because maybe they are."

He stepped through the door, which conformed to his shape for a moment before exploding into nothingness. The explosion must have claimed the dead creatures too, for they were also gone. Franklin stared at the space where the door had hung in the air, overcome by a sense of how much the mysterious in life outweighed the predictable. He had seen into another world today. That would change him. He knew that almost nothing from his life before today would carry much significance for him, at least not for a while. But there was still the Project. He was more certain than ever that he had to complete it. Not only for the sake of seeing the thing through, but in an attempt to grapple with the events he had witnessed. He feared how his mind might react to these events over time. And he desperately needed a place to put that fear.

The lighting throughout the building twinkled to life, and when he turned to leave, he saw the young man at the information desk, busily scribbling away with a pencil. Franklin thanked him for the use of the restroom on his way out. He'd lost his appetite for research.

Seed

by Kevin Wallis

Isaiah stared at the sight before him, his stomach curling into an anxiety-laced ball of nausea.

Every time, he thought. My own house makes me want to puke. Every damn time.

He stood at the end of his block. Four houses down to the left, a house with bile-green paint and shit-brown trim waited for him. The roof–like so many others on the block–threatened to cave in with the next big rain. The windows stared at the weed-covered yards of his neighbors through panes streaked with grime and despair. The house mocked him, dared him to return to the dreary future inside, begged him to come home and share in its misery.

He had dreaded this day for weeks–the day the tethering of his life to this obsolete town would be complete.

His backpack drooped down his shoulders. Shrugging to realign the bag of books, Isaiah marveled that he would probably never wear a backpack again, sit for a test, or crack vile jokes with his friends while the teacher prattled away about sciences and truths he would never need to recall. Hell, after today never need to learn anything new at all. High school was over. All that awaited him was the factory and soul-sucking town he called home.

Sighing, Isaiah reminded himself to act like the man he

knew he must become, and started on the damning trudge to his house. Five steps into the trip, he paused.

Nestled into the corner of the fence that lined the end of the street was a bizarre blasphemy of a tree. Isaiah had traveled this route home from school for four long years, yet he had never seen the tree before. Neighbors must have just planted it, he guessed. No way would I have missed something that ugly.

Standing about six feet tall, the tree exploded from the grass like a towering phallus. Two separate stalks jutted from the earth, melding into a thick mass of brown a few feet above the ground. Smooth bark, looking more like the leathery skin of a beach-obsessed surfer than anything botanic, branched into two jutting limbs on either side of the trunk. One limb stretched straight out from the body of the tree, pointing to Isaiah like the accusing arm of his parents. The other curved upwards until its leafless end rested nearly atop of the enormous purple bulb at the tree's peak.

Looks like a person, Isaiah thought. Whatever. If my loser neighbors want to spice up their lives with unaesthetic pseudo-trees, what can you do? He readjusted his pack again and set off.

Eat.

Isaiah stopped short, stumbling over his feet in his rapid halt. The word had originated within his head, but the command had demanded his attention return to the tree. Great, he thought. If trees are speaking to me, I guess the factory is the least of my worries.

Taking a few hesitant steps toward the obscene tree, Isaiah

examined the thing's apex. The fleshy purple bulb crowned its trunk like a featureless face. The blob glistened in the afternoon sunlight, its exterior a deep violet stolen from a rainbow's underbelly. A mass of thin white strands, apparently the tree's idiot concept of leaves, sprouted from the bulb and fell outward like the stringy head of an upright mop.

Eat.

"Shut the fuck up!" He felt foolish shouting at a tree, but this time the command had resonated through his bones and sent icy fingers to caress his flesh. He turned away once more, this time to sprint home . . .

. . . and took several more steps towards the plant. Details of its exterior (body?) came into view. Tiny berries dotted the limbs and trunk. They sprung from the tree by the hundreds, marring its otherwise smooth bark like mud-caked warts.

Saliva flooded Isaiah's mouth and he reached forth a hand, imagining the tangy crunch of the berries.

"Stop!" he shouted. His hand ignored him. Plucking a single berry from the tree, Isaiah opened his mouth and popped it in.

Isaiah gagged as he forced the berry down. His throat, expecting tanginess but receiving only filth, tried to force the fruit back out, past the traitorous tongue, but Isaiah finally managed to swallow.

Twin Suns illuminate the azure skies like watchful eyes. As they rise, they stare at the trio of descending moons in the distance, daring the lesser orbs to challenge the Suns' reign over the mossy landscape. I watch the Suns, reach for them, beg for

their sustenance. I fear they will blink, and in the darkness I will shrivel.

He grasped at the vision in his mind, willed the two beautiful suns back to him, tried to capture their nurturing beams to his breast, but the image faded into nothingness.

A tingling crept into his mouth. Not the pleasant tickle of a sweetly carbonated drink, but the annoying buzz of an unwelcome irritant. Spitting several times, Isaiah stumbled away from the tree. Just get home, he thought. Throw down a shot of Listerine and forget the last few minutes of my pathetic life.

The tingling had subsided a bit by the time Isaiah reached his house, only to be replaced by a bothersome pressure filling his head. He first thought a migraine must be coming, but flashes of color had always preceded his headaches before, not the sensation that his brain wanted freedom from his skull.

Isaiah opened the gate to the backyard. The door to the garage stood open, revealing his parents' wood-paneled station wagon inside. Great, he thought, closing the door. Not only am I coming down with malaria, but I gotta' deal with the folks' bullshit, too.

Ducking under a fern that strayed onto the porch from his mother's overgrown garden, Isaiah entered his house, his prison. He braced himself for the shit-eating grins of his father, welcoming him to the factory, to a future with polluted horizons and roads that led nowhere.

He flung his backpack onto the kitchen floor and vowed to leave it there forever. "Mom? Dad?" The mere act of speaking

sent more shockwaves of agony through his skull. He didn't hear a reply, and Isaiah was surprised to feel disappointment. He would gladly listen to the plans-for-your-future lecture if the distraction would alleviate the throbbing in his skull.

Isaiah's body spasmed as liquid fire exploded in his head. His legs stiffened, deciding their job as support beams was over, and he fell to the ground, groaning. He brought trembling hands to his head. What he felt bore no tactile resemblance to the face he remembered. He had to see.

Isaiah shambled to the bathroom. Panicked momentum nearly sent him crashing into the mirror, but the visage looking back from the glass screeched him to a halt.

His face swelled as he watched, expanding outward from the cheeks like a child's inflatable ball. The pressure in his skull magnified to ungodly proportions, ripping a scream from Isaiah's throat. The scream only accelerated the ballooning of his face. The corner of his mind not babbling in terror, wondered how his skin remained intact.

His skin . . . his skin was turning purple.

With fumbling hands he wrenched the faucet on and splashed water on his face, trying to rinse the foul transformation away as if it was grime. His mind reeled in hell, then sailed the heavens.

I bathe. The water drapes my limbs, and I drink, wishing the wetness would fall from the sky forever. I splay my filaments; open them up to the falling beauty, these bringers of life. It fills my being, gives me strength, empowers me with hope that the Suns have not abandoned us. It's now my time. I

call for my vessel. Soon, it will take me from this world, and I will worship all the Suns.

Trying to ignore the agony lashing his face, Isaiah pushed himself from the sink with lumber-stiff arms. His knees wanted to lock, tried to refuse him motion, but terror lessened his pain. He stumbled down the hallway, through the kitchen, and out the backdoor. He lurched to the door leading to his parents' car, but just as his hand fumbled for the doorknob, Isaiah stopped.

He stared at the backyard and tried to concentrate past his pain, on to whatever was calling to him. He ignored the interloping weeds and focused on the lavish green grass between them. The grass sang to him, invited him into the lush bed of their stalks. His mother's garden burst with a life he had failed to notice before. Extraordinary flowers–pinks, blues, yellows–graced the garden bed. Brilliant green leaves fluttered in the warm breeze, swelling Isaiah's soul with wondrous rapture. Isaiah strode into the yard, legs as straight as enormous wooden rulers, arms outstretched like an animated scarecrow.

No longer questioning his actions, he let the visions guide him. His fear still clung to him like a suffocating shroud, but his changing body acted with a will detached from his brain. The sun's rays opened their arms, welcoming him into comforting warmth and promising sweet oblivion.

His legs stopped. Isaiah tried to force them onward, but they felt trapped in stone. He turned his pulsating head downwards, afraid that the weight of his throbbing cranium would rip his skull from his neck. The sight before him infused his fear with renewed vigor.

His feet melted into the earth. Blades of grass swallowed his shoes until only his laces remained visible. In seconds, those too were consumed by fresh soil. He was powerless to move. Trapped. Not by the prison walls and suffocating existence of small town factory work, but by the yard where he had learned to throw a baseball, the grass where he had snuck a kiss from his neighbor's daughter at his sixth birthday party, a domain of family, now animated and breathing and claiming him as its own.

He had wanted bigger things from life. Bigger things had found him. A bubble of not-quite-sane laughter floated up through his panic.

Isaiah tried to survey his surroundings, this familiar realm made strange and new, but his head seemed stuck in drying concrete. Each tiny motion was harder for his neck to execute. A wave of molten lead rippled from his feet. Then his legs, torso, and arms solidified until all power of independent movement evaporated. Unable to see the transformation, Isaiah nevertheless envisioned the details. In his mind, he saw his clothes melt away, his pale skin replaced with a smooth brown exoskeleton. He screamed in mental anguish as his hands shrunk into his wooden arms, his fingers shriveling into capillary-like branches. The pain snipped away at his sanity, finally snapping the cord that tethered him to reality.

He tried to scream, but his lips fused together and melted into his skin. His nose shriveled, his eyes glossed over into violet sightlessness like a purple hood had been pulled over what once passed for his head.

Yet, he could see. Isaiah saw more clearly than he ever

remembered. The sun blazed gloriously overhead, the sky glowed like a blinding jewel of the deepest blue. Flowers from the garden exploded with color . . .

Isaiah felt the tree's mind pick its way through the garden, finally resting its vision on the life forms it sought - its brethren. Stood in the back corner of the garden, its pair of thick limbs reaching for the heavens. Two more trees towered above the rest of the foliage in the garden.

One had a fat trunk, looking as strong and vital as Isaiah's mother had looked corpulent, tapering at the top into the large purple bulb ringed by stringy white tendrils. The other was thin, stunted, branches as sharp as his father's tongue. Its bulb sat atop its body like a child's purple beach ball. The tentacle-like flowers lay plastered across both bulbs' fleshy exteriors like sweaty strands of hair. Undulations rippled across the surface of the bulbs, forming features all too familiar to Isaiah's new mind. He could still hear the raspy voices coming from those features demanding he clean his room, come home early, make us proud, don't disappoint your parents!

Isaiah's mind–or perhaps his mind was gone, engulfed by the will of the tree, he could no longer tell–latched onto the visions he had been cursed, no, blessed with experiencing. He delved deeper into the tree's world and saw its vessels soaring through the alien sky, illuminated by the twin Suns. The creatures soared on wings fit for gods, their span mind-bending. Eyes burned with the hunger to fertilize, to colonize. Limbs, skin, beaks, horns–all its features melded into a lunatic organism too wrong, too unearthly. Isaiah's frail human essence

refused to grasp the horror, or the beauty, of the beasts.

They heard my call, but they always do. They know not how to resist the beckoning. I hear them coming. I feel the wind stir with the drumming of their flight. The air sings with the beating of mighty wings, whistling their approach. They revel in their freedom. A shadow passes over me, and I open my tendrils. I yield to my vessel's love.

Isaiah watched through the tree's sight as the flying monstrosities sought out the trees and lit upon the purple bulbs. The trees' white tendrils burst into life, wrapping their silky arms around the bottom half of the beast. He gazed in awe as the bird-thing closed its many eyes, doing what it was bred for, doing all it knew to do. Finally, the beast leapt from the tree, its myriad hind claws clutching its prize, the seeds that will colonize other worlds. It stroked its powerful wings once, and disappeared into the Suns-lit distance to navigate the stars.

Isaiah returned his attention to what remained of his parents. They constantly dared him to defy them, almost wanting Isaiah's father to beat him into submission. Dear old Dad–his teacher, his master–never happy with above average grades, or accolades from peers. He was forever harping on his duties, and his obligation to the fucking factory.

Familiar anger tried to resurface, but Isaiah suppressed it beneath newfound purpose. What do you say now, Pop? How do you like me now?

His new omnipotent vision lifted and soared into the distance. From above the fence-line of his yard, from beyond the yards of the town entire, great purple bulbs dotted the

horizon. Nowhere did a person defile the beauty stretched before him.

And on the horizon, their vastness threatening to eclipse the life-spawning light, the vessels came to him, ravenous and eager to transport Isaiah's new essence to the heavens.

Memories of his fears of the factory mocked him. He would never again be trapped in this suffocating world of the weak. The galaxies were his playground. He would soon visit them all.

His tree-mind embraced him. Oh, the places we will go, the worlds we will seed!

Isaiah rejoiced. Then he knew only the Suns.

Salt and Copper

by Chris Bartholomew

Velcomre loved that he would live forever. He'd been around long enough that he couldn't remember for how long it'd actually been. Traveling from planet to planet with his kind had gotten so monotonous that he'd devised a plan to visit somewhere else, particularly one planet they had zoomed by recently–at least he thought it was recently, but he didn't really know.

He'd been a crew member of Coola Twelve for eons. They were going about the business of bringing meals made of other creatures back to home base, and most importantly, supplying their HighShe and HighHe with enough nourishment to create the endless supply of beings for their world.

"Sir Elaphantem, do you remember when we passed by that unusual planet and you said that it was inhabited by humans who looked somewhat like us? What was the name of that place?" Velcomre asked the ShipMaster of Coola Twelve.

"Surely you are talking about Earth. Yes, the people there resemble us. But they are silly creatures, not at all thinking as we are. They are useless because they let emotion get in the way. Had you been born there, you wouldn't have lived half as long because your emotions wouldn't allow you to drink of the life giving thing, that on Earth they call blood, and eat of the flesh," Elaphantem told him.

“Please tell me more about these people. Would I fit in if I went there? What changes to my appearance would I have to make if I went? How would I have to act and talk to these humans, and of their blood–is it like ours, and the other places we visit?” He wanted to know.

“Velcomre, I don’t know everything, you know. You would fit in just fine. There are people there called outcasts, ones who are unusual and look different. All you’d have to do is keep a hat on, and of course something they call sunglasses over your eyes. You wouldn’t need to communicate with anyone, as there are a lot of people who are uncomfortable with speaking there, but soon enough you’d learn how to talk to them,” he answered.

“And the other things I asked? What about the blood and flesh of the humans, could I exist on that if I were there?” Velcomre asked impatiently.

“Well, we left Earth as the last resort in the universe. The reason for this, Velcomre, is that we didn’t want to become addicted to salt and copper. Also, when we go to all the other worlds, missing persons go unnoticed. On Earth, well, they care for one another so much that if someone is gone, they go searching into things. To your question about blood and flesh–I’m sure our bodies would adjust to what it’s made of. We’ve never had to worry about that before,” he said.

Velcomre thought for a moment, wondering how his next question would go over.

“I wanted to ask you–since you are the one who determines where to take everyone aboard the Coola Twelve–would it ever be possible for me to go to Earth?” He looked down and waited

for the answer.

Sir Elaphantem was sometimes one to be afraid of and Velcomre hoped he hadn't gone over the line of their relationship.

"Velcomre, you are not as old as I am, but you're old enough that you can't even remember when you were young in time, so I understand that you are bored. I made a decision a long time ago to just live and do what I had to do, even though it's boring. I believe there have only been a handful of others who have chosen to do what you desire. They didn't go to Earth, but they did go elsewhere, never to be seen again."

"Sir Elaphantem–I want to come back–I was just wondering if I could go there for a little while and see how they are, and what their life tastes like." Velcomre said.

Elaphantem said thoughtfully, "The risk you take doing something like that is that coming back, our planet might no longer be to your liking. You have been able to travel with me, and go home. To be on Earth will be different; you'll have to be cunning if you are to live there. You couldn't take any food with you; you would have to find it there. You'd have maybe three days to conquer an Earthling, and they are full of emotional ways to persuade you not to drink and eat from them. We have taken some here and studied them through the years–I wouldn't wish them on anyone. This does not mean you can't go–in case you are wondering– but think about it. You have a few weeks before we'll be close enough to let you go anyway. And think about this–you would be there until my next come-around, about two years."

Velcomre asked, "They were here? What did you do? Did you talk to them, test their blood, what kind of things did you say to them?"

"There was no talking to these people. They would cry and beg to go home. When we took samples you'd think they were dying. It was a pleasure to take them back to Earth, let me tell you. There are tapes of the sessions if you'd like to review them before you decide. I'll have someone bring them to you," Elaphantem said, ending the conversation.

Velcomre returned to his room. He couldn't wait to see the tapes, and when they came he was almost rude to the one who brought them. He didn't want to waste time thanking someone; he wanted to see a human.

He watched glimpse after glimpse of human behavior and found it fascinating, especially the tapes in which couples were brought aboard. They were so concerned with their lives, and each other's. He could see Elaphantem's point–that it wouldn't be easy to get someone to help him live. It would be a challenge, though, and that would be a great thing when he was bored.

The two weeks were up and they were approaching Earth. It was time for a decision and he had come to one–he would be going for a two-year visit.

Elaphantem said, "I can see it in your eyes, so I know you are going. That is fine. I know you've thought over all the options, all the things that can go wrong. If you decide to come back with us, we'll meet at the exact spot you find yourself in when you arrive. If you aren't there on our return you will be

forever lost to us, so decide well my friend."

Velcomre told Elaphantem, "I viewed all there was regarding Earth and humans that you had aboard the ship. I will be fine."

When Velcomre arrived on the Earth, he was but a drop of water. He ran down the side of a building and into the street, almost running into the drain before he was picked up on the bottom of a woman's shoe. As she walked, he thought of how and where he would re-form, knowing he had but a small amount of time. He needed to be off her shoe. She entered a bar, took a seat, and crossed her legs. Noticing the blotch on the bottom of her expensive heels, she took off for the bathroom.

"The usual, Vivian?" The bartender asked.

"Yes, Dean. But I have to get some shit off my shoe, I'll be right back."

She wiped the spot with toilet paper and threw the tissue into the toilet. She flushed and walked back out to the bar, took her drink Dean had already prepared, and began her work.

Velcomre would retain the information of this woman, and he would compensate her for flushing him. He was in the cesspit beneath New York when he became himself again. He set out to find someone who would nourish him for a time. He knew if he kept walking it would lead him to a human being and the sooner the better.

Up ahead he saw a fire gleaming, and knew he'd found people. They were huddled together around a big canister, trying to keep warm down there in the humid underground.

"What's yer name mister?" One of the men asked.

"Vel, they call me Vel. How many people are down here–is there somewhere that I could rest and get dry?"

"Most of the people are around this area, if you keeps walkin' stratight you'll be runnin' into them. As far as getting rest and dry, this is as good a place as any. Only the heat of this fire down here is all."

Velcomre settled in–warming and watching the man at the flames–knowing it wouldn't be long before his starvation would be satiated. One of the three men started to wander off, and no one said a word to him. The other drank from a flask he held with both hands, until eventually, he too wandered away. Now there was just the two of them, and Velcomre waited only long enough for the two deserters to leave his vision before he pounced.

Quick as lightning he took the man and tore him in half, putting the bottom half into the fire and eating the rest. When he was finished, there was not even so much as a morsel left, and he lapped up all the blood. There was the smell of meat burning–and he knew that would bring out more people–so he fled in the direction from which he'd come, back up through the cesspool where he found a ladder and got back into the city..

He set out straightaway to find someone else to devour. He could hardly wait, though he knew he should take the time to learn something about the area. His appetite had been whet, and he found the taste of the blood and flesh intoxicating.

He walked along the streets of town, and it was just as Elaphantem said it would be. No one paid attention to the short

fat man. Nobody cared that his feet were two times larger than theirs, they also didn't seem to notice that his face–if they looked closely–was missing a chin. Yes, he fit in here.

Soon he smelled the scent he'd noticed upon arrival to the planet–the stench of the homeless, thoughtless, unkempt streets of a people who didn't care–and he knew that somewhere amongst the scent of urine and clutter was the woman he sought. Vivian was what she went by, and he would find her soon.

As he walked amongst the people going here and there, he began to notice someone following him, so he turned around and confronted the man. "What do you want? I noticed you following so don't bother to deny it. What is it you are after? I have nothing of value."

"Yes, I am following you. But only to give you this wallet you dropped when you crawled out of the sewer a few blocks back." Raising both hands as if being held up, he continued, "I wouldn't want to keep it–it's yours. But I wouldn't mind a bit of a reward on a cold, stormy night such as this. A drink maybe?"

Velcomre smirked at the man, opened the wallet, and seeing currency, motioned for the fellow to follow him. They entered the same tavern where Vivian had 'disposed' of him, the place she was trying to exchange money for sexual favors of the men who imbibed there.

"What'll it be gentlemen?" Dean asked the two.

Velcomre was very tempted to use the man's name, but thought better of it–best not to attract attention, as he fully intended on feasting on his gift bearing friend, if he couldn't get

to Vivian just yet.

"You order for us, while I use the other room." Velcomre scanned the joint before entering the men's room. He wanted to make eye contact with Vivian, but she was sitting upon the lap on one of the customers and she didn't look around the room.

Disappointed that he couldn't attract attention from anyone, Velcomre sat at the bar and drank with his new friend. They conversed about possible places where a new-comer could stay in town. The man named Victor offered his humble abode for a fortnight. Though Vel–as he had come to be known–had no idea of what a fortnight consisted of, he took the man up on the offer, thinking that he'd kill the man and rest in the home for a while.

Using the knife in the kitchen Vel parceled parts of Victor into handy chunks and put them in the refrigerator for later consumption. He ate the fingers down to the nails, chewing the bones with sips of blood he'd bled into a glass. He loved the idea of a table with all the fixings, plates to hold the man in place, as he ate the only thing that could keep him alive on the planet. To Velcomre, it seemed much less barbaric than killing one and eating them in the street, alley, or sewer. He thought about keeping the house for as long as he could make it work. He had no idea how long that would be, but decided he could use anyone who came to the door for food, scavenge, and stalk Vivian at night.

Sitting at the table, he started to notice the veins and arteries of the human remains in front of him that he'd planned to throw away. The idea occurred to make something of the rest,

for a terrible feeling came over him with the thought of wasting any part of someone, as he'd already left for ashes the remains of his first kill.

He'd noticed that many men in the city wore ornate things about their ears and necks. He decided to let the parts dry and use the bones of the chest–the V–for a necklace, and the veins and arteries for the chain. Such a macabre idea, and it would be glorious to tell what it actually was if anyone ever wanted to know–right before he disposed of them. This is what occupied his time until the next night came along. He ventured out of the house through the back door and didn't lock it behind him–as he couldn't find the keys–but he thought he'd be safe.

He went to the bar every night and learned a lot about the surrounding area, including a crocodile pond at a zoo, not two blocks from the house where he was staying. He fed the meat to the animals and after a while lugging leftover meat that far didn't faze him–he was getting so much strength from the food.

At the bar Vivian turned out to be his greatest asset. When she wasn't sitting in someone's lap, she was taking men behind the bar for a quick couple of bucks. He found it easy to go out the front door as the couple went out the back. Vivian would do her thing with the man, then hurry back to her next target, while the finished client stood there straightening their clothes and zipping up. More often than not Vel walked up and started a conversation about how he needed help getting home, and they'd offer to accompany him. Then, he would bring them into the house and play games until finally he killed and ate them, dragging the rest of the prey to the crocodiles down the road.

On the night Vivian finally approached him, he was sitting alone in the back of the bar watching her as he usually did.

"And what about a drink, if you're going to stare at me every night. What is your story? How'd your face get all marred up? Cat got your tongue?"

"No, I'm just not familiar with someone strolling right up and putting me down. You? How long you been a whore around these parts?"

She started to leave, but thought better of it.

"Okay, truce. I'm sorry, that was pretty blatant, but I couldn't help but notice that you don't have anything under your lower lip–it sticks out like a sore thumb. I reckon you aren't from here if you're used to people not saying anything about it. We aren't couth down here, you know."

They had a few drinks and she ventured to converse with him again, only this time asking about his necklace.

"Oh, this? It's made of veins and the chest bone of a dead man I wanted to remember. Do you like it? I can make you one."

She looked startled, touched her neck, and moved on to the next table.

For months Vel was able to accost more than his need for food. He became good at stalking and killing. He wasn't bored on Earth, not like at home. He wasn't lonely for the old ways, and found that he had adapted very well. As time went on, the authorities were at the bar more and more. He decided to move around because all of the victims were frequent customers before their disappearances. Though there were no bodies, he

hated looking over his shoulder.

It would have been perfect, had he not decided to toy one last time with Vivian at the bar. He invited her to dinner, and she accepted the invitation. As she was sitting at the table, he brought a hand out as an appetizer. She screamed and tried to run away. He grabbed her, and threw her down the basement stairs, watching with delight as she tumbled and then landed with a thud at the bottom.

"I thought you wanted to know what I did for a living, Vivian. I am but the shit on your shoe. One day you actually said that. 'Shit on my shoe', you said. Well, what I am is your master, and you are the main course." He walked slowly down the steps as he spoke; she laid there looking terrified.

He didn't waste time getting her to the table, though she struggled with all her might. He started with her eyes–as they were the easiest to tear out–and so went the demise of Vivian. He was in a feeding frenzy–so excited that he finally had the one who'd thrown him into the sewer, that he didn't bother killing her before tearing her apart. He was satisfied to know that she lived until he finally broke her neck.

Standing there devouring most of her body–holding onto the sack that was her neck–he was satisfied, as if for the first time in his life. He decided then and there that the best dinner was one he knew, so he vowed to no more kill strangers, to wait until some emotion built up before eating the flesh and drinking the blood. It was a new thought for him and it made him drunk in its fantastical wonder. Was he becoming connected? Was he developing a human nature? No, it was no more than an

attachment to a pet. But that attachment made everything taste better, and he loved it.

After the two years were over, he decided to stay. He couldn't leave such a wonderful place as Earth. People were easy prey, but not so easy as to become boring. He found that all he needed to do was strike up a friendly conversation with someone on the street, feed them dinner, and talk. If he promised them eternal life in the conversation, he had them. Too bad he couldn't deliver on that promise, but then, he would live forever and that was his true intention. What was it that Elaphantem had said, 'We didn't want to become addicted to salt and copper.' He was addicted now, not only to the smell and taste, but to the hunt, the feeling of accomplishment it gave him providing for himself, with no one to bring him food.

A month after the two-year deadline passed, Vel was very active in the community. He moved around as needed, always finding a home to occupy. He actually felt he was in the lap of luxury, until he smelled a foe. On arriving in another big city–on another rainy night, as he walked the streets–he felt someone following him, but gut instinct told him not to confront this one. Rather, he laid back a bit, and then walked into a bar on a corner. He ordered a drink and then took a seat at a back table facing the door. A man walked in–hat low on the head, wearing sunglasses, and a bandana around his neck. He started smiling when he recognized the ring on the pinky finger–it was Elaphantem.

"Hey old pal. Ha, I've been here just one month, and I already know we're friends."

“I can’t believe you’re here. What happened to the old–boring as it is, I’m staying here routine?”

“What I didn’t tell you, Velcomre, is how I knew about the addiction to salt and blood. I’ll tell you now. though. We brought some of the people to our planet. After eating them, we saw how it made us feel supreme; so, we decided it wasn’t a good idea to have a continuous diet of these people. I got to thinking about you not coming back and thought–why shouldn’t I come along? And here I am.”

“So you are here to stay, then? Tell me, why really did we not just cultivate this planet for food?”

“How long do you suppose they would have lasted? They would be extinct. But I think this planet has plenty of food for the two of us for a very long time.”

Midnight in a Small Town

By Wayne Goodchild

"Pass it over, babe."

After taking the joint from Linda, Jeff took a long drag and held the smoke in his mouth for a superhuman amount of time. Finally, he let it out in a satisfying cloud and handed the joint back to his girlfriend.

"That hits the spot," he wheezed.

Linda took a steadier hit, relaxing on the picnic blanket. Staring up at the stars, she breathed the smoke out into the midnight air. "The world's always more beautiful at night."

As if in response, the night sky suddenly filled with light and noise from a flaming ball of iridescent radiance that shot overhead and disappeared amongst the trees.

"Whoa!" Jeff stood up, unceremoniously dislodging Linda's lips from his face. "Did you see that?"

"So? It was a meteor, big deal."

"I think it landed in the woods–let's check it out!"

"Are you serious?"

"I heard you can get a lot of money if you find a meteorite; there could be rare minerals in it."

"You're such a nerd sometimes." Linda sighed, standing up to brush grass from her hot pants.

"Nobody's perfect," Jeff said with a grin, and picked up the

flashlight. “Come on!”

After stumbling through the trees for five minutes, the two teenagers managed to find the impact site. “There’s nothing left,” Jeff said, the disappointment evident in his voice.

Linda stepped closer to get a better look. “It musta completely burnt up when it–eurgh, what’s this?”

She lifted her shoe to reveal a sticky black mess. Jeff aimed the torch at her feet. A rainbow of colours swirled under the light.

“It looks like oil,” he said, bending down and touching it. Bringing his finger close to his nose he took a sniff and grimaced. “Sure smells like oil...”

“Maybe whatever landed broke open on impact and spilled it?” Linda suggested, toking on the joint.

“Space junk.” Jeff nodded, wiping the black residue on his jeans. “What a bust. Come on. Let’s get back to our picnic.”

“The moment’s passed, Jeff.” Linda offered a lop-sided smile. “Why don’tcha just take me home, huh?”

Jeff sighed and gave her a kiss. Hand-in-hand, the two of them walked back to the car, packed their things, and then drove away from the woods.

“I’ve got a clean shot,” Hank whispered.

“Take it, Hank!” Dean urged.

The older man didn’t need to be asked twice, and with a sharp “crack!”, he shot the deer in the head. The hunters stood up from their hiding place to watch as the animal staggered drunkenly out from the cover of the trees, and collapsed on its

side.

"Nice shot!" Sam whooped. As the men approached their prey, their triumphant cries and back-patting died a quick death when they saw the state of the deer.

"Looks like it has some kind of infection." Earl gingerly inspected the multitude of small, dark lumps that stretched under the animal's skin, distorting its head and flanks.

"Damn! I hope the meat's not spoiled," Dean cursed.

"Mind yourself, dude–I'll check." With a grunt, Sam propped the deer on its back and sank his hunting knife into the creature's hide. As he made an incision from the black-tail buck's genitals up towards its ribcage, a jet of black blood spurted across his orange vest and dotted the right side of his face. "Gross," he said, peeling the deer's skin back. Hank and Dean pulled in close as Sam's grisly handiwork revealed the animal's guts. Or rather–lack thereof.

"That's fuckin' wrong." Hank shook his head, not sure what else to say. His friends evidently thought he'd summed the sight up succinctly, as they remained speechless. A collection of shiny black lumps filled the deer, their appearance at once strange, and disturbingly familiar.

"Kinda looks like an insect," said Hank, spitting his chewing tobacco out.

"Don't look like no insect I ever seen before," Dean said, his face pale.

"What is it, Earl?" Sam asked.

The vet leaned in close and gently prodded the black meat inside the deer. "No clue," he admitted, watching as blood

stained the tips of his glove. "I'd better take it to my surgery to examine."

"D'ya think it's anything serious?"

"I don't know, Dean," Earl said, turning away from the carcass. "Could just be a parasite. Let me go fetch the tarpaulin from my truck–it'll be easier to carry if we wrap it in that."

Once Earl had disappeared from sight, Hank took his own knife out. "Maybe this stuff here's just coatin' the intestines..." Even though he tried to pierce the black meat cautiously, a spray of dark blood was forced from the puncture wound and onto the bare skin of his left arm. "Shit! Gimme a hand here, Dean."

The other hunter knelt beside Hank and held the deer steady while Hank continued to cut. More blood sprayed out, this time splashing Dean. "Screw this, Hank–you're makin' a fuckin' mess. Just leave it for Earl to look at." He stood in disgust, wiping his face at the same time.

Earl reappeared a few minutes later with a large sheet of tarpaulin, onto which the four hunters eased the deer carcass. With the animal safely and firmly ensconced within the blue material, Sam helped Earl carry it back towards the pick-up.

Jeff woke with ringing in his ears. Annoyed, he slammed his right hand down on the alarm clock and silenced its metallic clanging. He groaned, rubbed his face...and paused. His entire right hand and arm were covered with small, dark lumps. He'd have to do something about them. With a grunt, he slid out of bed

and pulled some clothes on, including a long-sleeved shirt and gloves. That should do it, Jeff thought, satisfied.

Linda managed to wake herself up without the aid of an alarm clock. With a yawn, she staggered into the bathroom, wincing at the light streaming through the window. She turned to check her reflection, her eyes widening at the sight of the small lumps that surrounded her mouth. She couldn't be seen looking this way. She hurried into her bedroom and pulled the curtains tightly closed against the intruding daylight, before settling back into bed.

When her mother came to check on her twenty minutes later, Linda hid her face beneath the quilt and spoke in a muffled voice. "I feel very ill. I do not want to go to school today. Female problems."

Her mother frowned at her daughter's peculiar speech, but–being an understanding and doting parent–agreed to leave her daughter to rest, saying "I'll bring you some food later." Linda listened to her mother's footsteps retreating down the stairs, and allowed herself a small smile; it had begun.

Dean, Sam, and Hank all had someone or something to go back to whenever they returned home–Dean and Sam had their families, and Hank had his alcohol. Earl only ever had an empty house. After putting the black-tail carcass into cold storage, Earl had travelled back into the woods, and was still trying to process (in all senses of the word) what he'd found there. Some of the tests he'd carried out on the samples

wouldn't provide results for a while, and whenever he tried to mentally comprehend his latest discovery, his brain just sort of...gave up. He needed a momentary break from his examinations and tests.

Trudging into his study, Earl fell heavily into the chair by the desk, and then hefted the manuscript from a bottom drawer. Almost impossible to believe he'd been working on it for close to a year. Almost impossible to believe it'd cost him his marriage.

He picked up a framed photograph of Jenny–smiling in the backyard of the house. Lilly stood beside her with a bunch of flowers in her little hands and a big grin on her pretty face.

The counsellor had said that people deal with grief in different ways. Jenny had cried almost continuously for two weeks. Earl decided to write a book. Jenny had gotten angry with him, saying that their grief should be a private thing–not publicized for all to read. Earl said it might not even end up getting published, so what did it matter? She argued it was the principle of the thing, he said it was a cathartic experience, she said he shouldn't have had to lose a daughter before learning to show his emotions, he said 'How's this for showing emotion?' and slapped her.

Jenny couldn't bear to stay in Oakville, and moved back to the city. Earl's hand hovered over the nearby telephone, but as always, he never called her. In return she never called him, but Earl knew she never would until he had the guts to call her first.

A sheet of A4–its surface blank as his dead daughter's eyes–rested in the typewriter on the desk. Every time Earl

thought of Lilly, and her disease, his thoughts abruptly turned to the deer. He might not have been in the right profession to help Lilly, but he could try and figure out what had affected the black-tail. He had some pretty good ideas, but the implications were terrifying–if his ideas were right.

He was brought out of his reverie by the phone ringing. "Hello?"

"Hey Earl–it's Reggie. I got your message. What's the deal?"

"Me and the boys were hunting this morning and we bagged a deer. There's some kind of…" he searched for a word, "growth, inside it. Looks like nothing I've ever seen before, which is why I wanted you to take a look at it."

"I'd be happy to. I should be finished here soon. So, do you want me to meet you at yours, or...?"

"I managed to convince Bill Hannon to let me store the carcass in one of his meat lockers, if you're okay to meet me there?"

"Sure. I can be there in...an hour and a half?"

"Great. Later, Reggie." Earl hung up, then stood and stretched. After fetching a glass of water from the kitchen, he sat back down at his desk, and willed himself to start writing. The clean sheet of paper returned the effort by staring blankly back at him.

Jeff pushed Susanne against the wall and tasted her tongue with his own. She made claws of her hands and grabbed his buttocks, his shoulders, and then his head, eager to keep him

close. After a few minutes of intense kissing, however, she had to push him away so as to draw in proper breaths.

"Damn, Jeffery Stevens. I never thought I'd get you away from that dog, Linda. Where is she today, anyway?"

"Who cares? She is not important to me any more." Jeff grinned, moving in for another kiss.

"Cool it, handsome." Susanne kept him at arm's length. "Why don't you take those gloves off?"

"No." Jeff stepped back. "I have a...skin allergy...at the moment. It is very severe. I must keep the gloves on for now."

"Like, I'm so sure." Susanne rolled her eyes. "And what's with your voice? You sound kinda...different."

"I do not know what you are talking about."

Susanne shrugged and pulled him close. "Okay, whatever. C'mere, stud."

Linda slowly festered in the gloom of her bedroom. Her insides grumbled and cracked, making it uncomfortable to remain lying down. She pushed the quilt away and clambered out of bed, to re-settle her body in a high-backed chair. Part of her wanted to try and make it to school–she was jonesing to taste and touch the fresh bodies there. With some difficulty, she managed to ignore this new need; it wouldn't be too long before she was truly free, and then she could taint as many people as she liked.

Reggie Jones had suffered the double indignity of premature grey hair, and early-onset male pattern baldness,

reducing his once-lustrous curls to a ponytail and a ring of hair around the top of his ears. To the casual onlooker, it would appear that Reggie Jones had realized he could still grow some hair and thought, 'Do you know what? I'm going to make the most of it'. As a style, it was as unsuitable as calling a middle-class white boy from California 'Reginald'.

Small, round glasses constantly roosted on the edge of his nose, giving him an air of 'casual librarian', whilst a scruffy shirt and trousers hid both his paunch and meticulous desire for neatness and order. Since he was by no means an unattractive man, Reggie knew his occupation wrong-footed many female acquaintances. Reggie Jones was the county coroner, and he loved his job.

"I can't wait to see this deer!" He grinned at Earl. "But why's it here?"

Earl strode towards his friend, and then shook his hand. "I didn't have any room at the surgery, and I wanted to keep it in as complete a condition as possible for you to examine," Earl explained, leading Reggie around the back of Hannon's Family Butchers. "Bill had plenty of room in his meat locker, and I reasoned that as long as I kept the deer covered up, there wouldn't be any risk of contamination."

"Did you tell him that?"

"No. I just said me and the boys needed somewhere to store our kill from this morning for a couple of hours, and he didn't mind."

"What didn't I mind?" Bill stood by the open back door, the remnants of a hand-rolled cigarette in his mouth.

"Just telling Reggie what a pal you are, Bill–letting me store some meat here."

"Hey, no problem." Bill spat the cigarette out and crushed it underfoot, and then lead the two other men inside. "Say, Earl, you've got the be the only vet I know who likes killing animals as much as saving 'em." Bill chuckled, unlocking the large door to the cold storage.

"How many vets do you know?"

"Just you," the butcher said, grinning. He swung the door open and flicked a switch.

Harsh fluorescents buzzed into life and bathed hanging slabs of meat in light, their surfaces caked in red frost. The deer–safely wrapped in a green, plastic bodybag–hung at the back of the walk-in refrigerator, surrounded by empty hooks.

"Give me a hand pulling it down, Earl," Jones said, pushing his glasses further up on his nose. Earl stepped closer, and together the two men grabbed the bag. It immediately sprang to life–wicked, black hooks slicing out from inside of the bag, revealing both a tumorous growth and the dead eyes of the deer itself.

"Fuck!" Bill pinballed off slabs of meat as he staggered backwards out of the meat locker.

"I thought you said it was dead!" Jones shouted at Earl, fighting the animal's kicking legs whilst simultaneously trying to dodge insectile claws which slashed through the bag.

"It was! You can see the bullet hole where Hank put one through its brain! Dammit–" Earl let go of the struggling corpse, then dashed from the room.

He returned a moment later with his hunting rifle–to find Jones standing back and watching the creature as it buckled and writhed, bleating tonelessly and shrilly.

Earl aimed at the beast's head and fired a single, devastating shot. Pieces of the animal's skull exploded through the back of the bodybag, showering blood and bone across the back wall of the meat locker. Jones held his hands up to his ears and swore profusely.

As the animal continued to jerk and scream, Earl realized he'd shot the wrong part. He raised the rifle and fired directly into the black mass inside of its body. The deer and the black organism jerked once, twice–and then slumped inside the remains of the bodybag, fully dead once more.

"Christ on a bike!" Jones half-laughed. "I have never seen anything like that before in my life!" Making noises of relief, he tried to lift the carcass off the hook. Earl slung his gun over his shoulder and helped his friend, mindful of the black liquid that oozed inside the tattered bag.

They lifted the body together and carried it out of the shop via the back door. Bill followed them, his face pale. Wringing his hands, he said, "What was that? What happened?"

"I had to kill it again," Earl said, lifting up and locking the back panel to the pick-up.

"Why the hell–"

"Oh, and you might want to wear gloves next time you go in the fridge," Jones added, sliding into the truck's passenger seat. "It made a bit of a mess."

Doris giggled as Jeff yanked her into the empty classroom. "We'll get in so much trouble if we get caught!"

"I do not care," Jeff said, kissing her across the neck.

"I saw you with Susanne Edwards earlier–I thought you were going out with her now."

"She is not important to me," Jeff muttered, pressing against the curve of the other teenager's breasts.

Doris moaned softly and playfully nibbled his ear. "I'm not wearing panties..." she whispered.

Jeff flashed a decidedly hungry grin, and started to pull her blouse out from her pants. "I have heard the rumours," he said.

Linda felt her body shift and distort, but as if it were happening underwater. Pain was fast attaining a peculiar, secondary importance to everything else. The most uncomfortable sensation she was experiencing was impatience. She wanted to be free. With every passing minute, every new change, she wanted to leave the room. But she couldn't, not yet. For one thing it was still daylight outside, and she instinctively knew it would slow the whole process down–and she couldn't have that, not when she still had to contaminate her parents.

Back in the coroner's lab, the flayed hide from the deer lay spread out against the cold metal of the examination table, fully revealing the grotesque form that had lurked beneath.

"It's incredible," Reggie Jones said in blatant awe, "and completely different from anything I have ever seen before."

Dotted around the table in steel pans of various sizes, black chunks of flesh sat in puddles of equally black liquid. Earl stared, transfixed, as their respective surfaces glimmered with a hundred colours that should never exist. Jones snapped his fingers. "Earth to Earl."

"Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I asked what tests you'd carried out before taking the carcass to Bill's."

"I was working under the assumption that it was some form of parasite, so I checked for poisons, neurotoxins, that sort of thing."

"And?"

"Nothing. Short of the creature apparently using the deer as a host, I couldn't find any other signifiers commonly associated with parasitic organisms. Plus, I'm not too keen on calling it a parasite because it appears to have completely consumed the deer's internal organs and most of its skeleton…"

"And what sort of parasite does something that, by rights, would kill its host?" finished Jones, nodding to himself.

"Exactly," said Earl. "What good would that do? Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"This thing," he pointed at the black meat, "is a developmental stage of something else."

"Do you think it might be?"

"I honestly have no clue. Despite absorbing or otherwise destroying the deer's insides–I couldn't find a trace of anything even remotely resembling a heart, lungs, or anything like that relating to the

organism itself."

"I've noticed that," said Jones. "I mean, even referring to this–" he swept his hand over the black chunks, "as meat, seems a bit of a misnomer; as under microscopic inspection the structure of the material reveals an apparently constant link of an unidentifiable, honeycombed pattern, where each part of the structure is in fact a smaller version of said structure, that appears to have no discernible beginning or end. It might even be constantly replicating, but I–"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Earl silenced Jones with one hand, whilst using the other to rub his forehead. "This is all giving me a headache, Reggie."

"Don't worry about it." Jones smiled. "I'm struggling to get my head around it myself." He laughed briefly, pleasantly. "But now the $64, 000 question: was the organism dead when you put it into cold storage, or simply lying dormant?"

"Give me a break, Reggie. Sam stuck his knife in it. Don't you think it would have attacked us then, if it'd only been asleep? Plus, my earlier examination was thorough enough that I definitely would've noticed if the creature was still alive."

"Fair point. In that case, I can only come to the conclusion that this creature–for want of a better word–absorbed or otherwise destroyed the deer's insides before the deer was killed."

Earl's face twitched. "I almost thought that, except for the fact the deer couldn't have been walking about without bones or guts. That's impossible."

Jones held his hands up. "I can only tell you what my tests have

told me."

The vet sighed. "What else have your tests shown you, Reggie?"

"Little else you didn't already mention on the way over here."

"You do realize what this could be, right?"

"Yes," Jones admitted, "but I almost refuse to believe it."

"It's so...alien to anything else I've ever seen that it may well be a new species," Earl announced. Even saying this out loud didn't seem to dispel the secret fear he harboured deep within himself.

"Have you contacted the relevant authorities about this discovery yet?"

"No. I wanted to verify my theories first–"

"Which is why you asked me to take a look at it…?"

"Yep. But that's not all, Reggie." Earl sighed heavily. "What did that other sample you look at suggest to you?"

Jones sounded bemused, "Do you mean the separate blood sample? It's exactly that–a sample of the organism's blood."

"I took that blood sample from outside of the creature; it was surviving independent of the organism itself."

"How?"

Earl jangled his truck keys. "I need to show you something else before we go making important phone calls–it's in the woods, near where the boys and I found the deer. It'll be easier to explain once you've seen it for yourself."

Jeff returned home just as his mother was leaving for her

evening shift at the Vixen Bar. He spoke briefly with her, giving her a kiss on the cheek when she gave him a hug. Pleasantly surprised by her son's show of affection, Paula Stevens jogged to work with a smile on her face and a darkness already slowly spreading beneath her skin.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" asked Kelly–Linda's mother– from the other side of her daughter's bedroom door. "Can I come in?"

Linda shifted from the chair, back into the bed. "Yes," she said, pulling the quilt over her swollen legs and arms.

Kelly eased the door open and slipped into the room. "Mr. Moore let me leave work early to come and check on you. How you feeling?"

"Tired," Linda said, her voice muffled by the bed sheet.

Her mother sat on the edge of the bed and leaned closer. Stroking Linda's hair, she said, "Would you like me to bring you some food up?"

"I am not hungry."

"Oh my, you must be ill." Kelly Jenkins laughed softly as she leaned closer to Linda, meaning to kiss the top of her daughter's head. As soon as she was close enough, Linda turned and gave her mother a quick, wet kiss on the cheek, before hiding her lower face back under the quilt.

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, sweetie." Kelly gave a concerned smile, started to say something else, and then decided to leave it. A little unnerved, but not sure why, she eased back out the

bedroom and left Linda alone. Although she wasn't, not exactly.

Earl dropped Jones back off at his lab in the police station, and then returned home to his study. Reggie's reaction to the substance creeping through the woods had been exactly the same as his; that is to say, the coroner had expressed both fear and incredulity, at approximately the same time. He'd taken new samples of the oil-like matter, deciding to run some different tests on it. Once they'd compared notes and discussed results–and therefore had a fuller understanding of what they might be dealing with–they would notify the correct authorities. No point in causing unnecessary panic, they'd both agreed.

All of which left the ball firmly in Reggie's court. Earl hoped–desperately hoped–that Reggie's expertise would cancel out their earlier hypothesis, as unlikely as it seemed.

On his desk, Earl's typewriter continued to taunt him with its clear white paper–a blank canvas waiting for Earl to stamp words into its face. "Take your anger out on me," that sheet of A4 said to him. "Or your grief. Do whatever you want to me."

I can't, he replied, without opening his mouth. I don't have anything left to give.

"I don't have anything left to give," he repeated aloud. This was by no means a realization slow in its dawning–rather, he'd figured this out a few weeks earlier–yet it was only then that he had finally accepted it as fact. It had to have been the world's slowest epiphany: the worst of it may be over, but the profound melancholy would remain–for the rest of his life.

The phone shrieked at Earl, and he swiped at it. "Yes?"

"It's Reggie. I've finished running more tests on that oil from the woods, and after double-triple-checking everything, I have to admit that…well…it doesn't look good."

"It is infectious, isn't it?" Earl's secret fear came bubbling to the surface, unbidden and unwelcome.

"Looks that way," Jones agreed. "Which is really peculiar, given that we're discussing an animal of some type. But, it's an animal with contagious blood–that's the kicker. This 'blood-oil' appears to infect whatever it touches. I don't know why it didn't soak into the flora, but I most certainly would not recommend letting that stuff touch your skin, or the blood from the deer, come to mention it." Jones continued talking, but his chatter sank, turning into muted background noise. "Earl? Are you still there?"

"I have to go check on Sam, Reggie. I'll call you back." With that, Earl slammed the handset down and dashed from his house.

Reggie hung up and returned to the oil sample. Blood, he corrected himself. Although it does seem remarkably similar in many aspects to–

A thudding noise broke his train of thought, drawing his attention towards the small refrigerator where he'd stored all his specimens. Something thumped against the inside of the door.

"Ah yes, very funny," Jones yelled, reaching for the door handle. Some of the sheriff's men liked to play practical jokes from time to time–zipping themselves up in bodybags, lying in

morgue drawers ready to grab him, things like that. No doubt this time they'd shut a poor, defenseless animal inside the fridge to scare him when he opened it. "Don't worry, I'll–"

The instant Jones pulled the door open something burst forth, something that put the words insect and cancer immediately into his head. Jones screamed, and crossed his arms over his face, ready for a physical assault. Instead, the creature noisily writhed violently across the room, before disappearing through a broken grille into the vents.

Jones looked inside the fridge, shocked to see that all of the organism samples were gone.

The day was coming to a close and both Jeff Stevens and Linda Jenkins welcomed the coming night with open arms. Jeff, because it meant his transformation would speed up; Linda, because she knew the thing inside her was almost ready to break free and take her with it. Both gave brief consideration to those they had managed to taste during the day, and felt pleased with their work. This was the last human sentiment either of them experienced.

Earl's pick-up skidded to a halt near the spot he'd already visited twice. He jumped out to find the coroner and Sheriff Bannister impatiently waiting for him. "This better not be some damn fool way for you boys to get back at me for my men playin' tricks on Jones."

"Why would you think that?"

"Because Jones tried to convince me a monster attacked him in

his lab."

"It's not a monster, it's an alien species," Jones retorted indignantly.

"Yeah, that's right–an alien. Like from outer space, right? Sure thing, Jones." Bannister laughed, and followed the other two men as they headed into the woods.

"It attacked you?" Earl looked at Jones in confusion. "Are you all right? Did it somehow wake up again?"

"Something like that. It freaked out and escaped my lab through an air vent. And no, it didn't harm me. Was Sam okay?"

"Yeah, I guess. He seemed a little distracted but otherwise fine."

"What are you boys talkin' about?"

"Here, Sheriff. Look." Jones pointed at the nearby trees.

"Holy shit..." Bannister took a step closer. "What is it? Oil?"

Several meters from where the hunters had spotted and killed the deer, the woods suddenly sank into an ominous darkness–the trees, the ground, the bushes, everything was smothered in a thick black substance. It didn't drip, flow, or pool. Instead it appeared to cling tenaciously to the trees, the plants, the ground, like paint.

"No Sheriff," Earl replied, shaking his head, "it's blood."

"What...?"

"Basically, Sheriff…" Jones turned to him. "…we believe this got inside a deer and caused an organism to grow within. That's what escaped from my lab. And the blood from that organism

exactly matches the structural composition of this compound. We think this 'oil' might even be the creature itself, as it doesn't coagulate or behave quite like blood that's been left outside of a body. And look at how much there is."

"That's an awful lot of science talk, but I think I get the idea. Are you sayin' we need to keep this area under quarantine?"

"I've called the Center for Disease Control," Jones revealed. "Someone should be here tomorrow morning to take a look at it."

"What else did they say?" asked Earl.

"If we think there might be a danger to human life, we should try to quarantine the affected subjects."

"Are you sayin' this shit could be contagious?" Bannister took a step back from the blood-oil.

"We don't know," Earl said. "We could be dealing with an alien species. As in 'new animal', Sheriff–not 'little green men'."

Bannister shrugged. "Who was the Sam you mentioned? Sam Gordon?"

"Yep. He got some blood on him when he cut into the deer, but I checked on him and he seemed fine." This wasn't entirely true, as there had been something that bothered Earl when he went to visit his friend, but he still couldn't put his finger on it.

"And on top of this, there's some kinda weird creature loose in Oakville." Bannister lit a cigarette and grimaced. "And there I was thinkin' the biggest problem this town faced was

when those high-school kids got hopped-up on gorilla biscuits and hot-wired all the patrol cars."

Once they returned to the police station, Bannister called several government authorities and informed them of the situation. He was told they'd send agents over in the morning, and to make sure people were kept off the streets for the night. Not enjoying the prospect of searching for a mysterious animal during the night, Bannister decided to wait until morning. In the meantime, he chose to telephone folks and send groups of police out to speak with Oakville residents, to warn them about a "wild bear". He told his men to make sure the residents knew that if they had to leave their homes, they should not travel alone. By the time the police had managed to contact most of the population–just over two thousand in Oakville–night had fallen. Those who were foolhardy or sceptical braved the streets and bars, though most people decided to err on the side of caution and remain indoors, which is exactly how the organism spread so quickly.

The transformation during the night was incredible, if not downright terrifying; the blood-oil had broken free from the cover of the woods and coated several parked vehicles at the edge of town. The black liquid shimmered, both with unnatural colours, and the imperceptible hint of movement. Bannister stood between Jones and Earl, and swore quietly.

"I've already received a number of phone calls this mornin' from townsfolk worried because they can't reach their friends,

family, or staff," Bannister said. "All my officers, 'cept Deputy Lakemore, either called in sick today or just didn't show up." He paused to light a cigarette, before continuing. "And Principal McCarthy over at Oakville High called to tell me that a sizeable percentage of his pupils hadn't turned up, and asked if there was an illness going around which he should know about.'"

"What did you tell him?" asked Jones.

"I said yes, there was, but it wasn't anything to worry about–just a particularly nasty stomach bug. But the fact remains that, by my reckonin', a quarter of Oakville succumbed to the same thing in one night." He looked at his companions. "What do you say to that?"

"What do you expect us to say, Sheriff?" Earl crossed his arms across his chest. "Sorry we didn't tell you sooner? Yeah, okay…maybe, but we both wanted to make absolutely sure that what we were dealing with was actually dangerous. Right, Reggie?"

"Yes." Jones nodded. "Look–maybe we're all getting a little freaked out because of the events surrounding Earl's discovery," he suggested.

"Earl and I got quite a shock when the creature inside the deer apparently came back to life. And then the remains I'd stored in my lab re-combined and escaped, which is just wrong–no matter how you try and slice it. But…" he paused dramatically, "we've had no reports of people being attacked by anything strange…have we?"

"No," Bannister admitted.

"Remember, Sheriff, Earl found the organism in a deer. There was no real suggestion it would be harmful to humans, and we still don't actually have any proof that it is. I mean, have you seen anyone today who's apparently sick?"

"No, but what about this?" He pointed his cigarette at the blood-oil. "Even I can see this ain't right, the way it's spread at least eight miles in one night. How we supposed to contain this?"

"I'll admit this is unexpected," said Jones. "Government agents should be here before lunchtime, though, so–"

"They can take care of everything." Bannister grinned sourly around his cigarette.

By lunchtime, however, no one had turned up to help. Jones had contacted an acquaintance at the Center for Disease Control, who said someone was on their way even as they spoke, and for the time being they might want to consider enforcing a town-wide quarantine. Jones had thought it a tad dramatic–and said so. His contact had explained that in the situation of an unknown infectious organism being loose within a densely-populated area, the best course of action is 'better safe than sorry'.

So Jones, Earl, Bannister, and Deputy Lakemore had spent the morning searching the town as best they could for any signs of the creature that had escaped from Jones's lab, to no avail. As they wandered the streets, the foursome called by the bars and shops that were open and suggested the occupants think about closing early.

"What's going on, Sheriff?" asked Janine Fox, owner of the Vixen Bar.

"We think there's some kind of non-lethal outbreak loose in this town," Bannister said, "for now the best course of action we can suggest at the moment is for people to head home an' stay indoors."

"A lot of my staff were acting funny last night and this morning," Janine said. "I had to send a bunch of them home. Even Paula, who's never taken a sick day the whole time she's been here. How worried should I be, Sheriff?"

"It's just a precaution–I have to stress that. Like I said, the virus ain't lethal, just highly uncomfortable. Did you in any way, er, interact with any of your sick staff?"

"Not personally, no."

Bannister considered this for a moment, and appeared pleased with Janine's response. "Government agents should be here soon to sort everything out, but for now they've suggested we try an' get people to stay indoors, as a kind of makeshift quarantine."

"Can't I leave town?"

Bannister shook his head. "I've managed to get some of the boys from the local army reserves to set up roadblocks. No one's allowed to leave town just yet."

Variations of this conversation played out during the next few hours as the four men continued to warn people, with responses ranging from frightened obedience to fearful accusations and minor scuffles.

"I wish there were an easier way to handle this," Bannister

said at one point, removing his Stetson and wiping sweat from his forehead. "Why the hell ain't the government here already?"

Back at the police station, it wasn't too much of a surprise when the coroner received a message from the Center for Disease Control with the news that their arrival had been delayed–for unstated reasons.

"I don't like this one bit." Lakemore voiced the thoughts of all four men. "I say we leave town ourselves. I know half the men on the roadblocks so I don't think it'll be too much of a problem getting past 'em."

"Don't be such a candyass, Deputy," Bannister growled. "If you desert Oakville you can kiss goodbye to your job."

"No offense, Charlie, but I couldn't care less about that right now."

"Then why the hell are you still here?" Bannister asked, his gaze narrow and severe.

Lakemore looked uncertain for a few seconds, then turned on his heels and left the building. The sheriff turned his gaze on Jones and Earl like a malevolent lighthouse. "What about you two?"

"Until the authorities get here you'll need our expertise if we find anything else linked to the organism." Jones shrugged and looked at Earl, who nodded ruefully.

"Then that's settled. I reckon we've done about all we can for now." Bannister sat down at the desk and picked up the phone. "I'm gonna keep buggin' the army and whoever else I can get hold of–find out when the hell they're turnin' up."

An increasingly tense atmosphere blanketed the town, causing an uncanny silence to spread slowly and deliberately, as imperceptible in its advancement as the blood-oil on the edge of town. Bannister kept to his word and either telephoned or radioed various branches of the government–whilst Earl and Jones handled calls from worried townsfolk–until all phone lines and radio signals abruptly died.

"They've cut us off." The sheriff held his telephone handset as if he'd never seen one before.

"Makes sense, if they're imposing a blackout. I think that's what they usually do in these situations," said Jones.

"But they're supposed to let me know, goddammit!" Bannister paced furiously back and forth. "This ain't right," he muttered to himself, shaking his head, "this ain't right at all..."

Dusk lowered its purple gaze over Oakville to find Bannister and Earl making a final sweep of the town in a patrol car. They were on their way back to the station–where Jones waited optimistically for someone to contact him–when Earl said to the sheriff, "Can we call by Sam Gordon's?"

"Something botherin' you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. You noticed how a lot of homes we've passed have had their curtains closed all day?"

"Now that you mention it..." Bannister nodded, as they pulled up in front of Sam's modest two-story house. "That's definitely a little odd."

Earl got out of the car and crunched up the driveway, the

sheriff close behind him.

"I think that's what was bothering me yesterday when I came here," Earl explained as he knocked on Sam's front door, "all his curtains were drawn during the day. Something about that just didn't sit right with me."

When no-one came to the door, Earl tried knocking louder.

"I don't think they're going to answer." Bannister waved Earl aside.

"Are you about to do what I think you're about to do?"

"Hey–the years might be catching up with me, but I ain't completely useless." Bannister booted the door with the sole of his left boot, cracking it. Two more kicks caused the door to swing open on a broken latch. "See? I still got it." He winked at Earl and led the way inside the house.

"Hello?" Earl called, as both he and the sheriff followed the sounds of a television into the lounge. Ruth and Benny–Sam's wife and ten-year-old son–were reclining on the sofa, watching a game show. Earl took a step closer and noticed their eyes were glazed and their bodies deformed. Something was moving around beneath their skin.

"What the hell's wrong with 'em, Earl?"

"I don't know," Earl said, although he had an inkling.

Failing to suppress a shudder, he walked past Ruth and Benny and stuck his head into a room off the lounge–Sam's den. A gasp of revulsion escaped his lips at the sight of his friend. It looked, for all intents and purposes, as if Sam's skin had been stretched over another body–his back and shoulders were swollen and hunched, giving the impression of a bloated

carapace, and his arms and legs had atrophied and fused together. He stared at the far wall, unblinking, from a desiccated face. Earl moved closer still, and asked "Sam?"

His eyes tipped back into his skull, leaving dark holes, and a sharp, black shape erupted from between his lips, clawing away at the flesh. Uttering a mingled cry of horror and disgust, Earl turned and bumped into the sheriff.

"Run, Sheriff!"

"Fuck me," said Bannister. It seemed the most appropriate response.

He unloaded several bullets into Sam's body, to no apparent detriment to the black shape hacking its way out. Cursing, Bannister ran from the house to find Earl revving the patrol car's engine.

"Get in!" the vet shouted. Before Bannister even closed the passenger door, Earl gunned the engine and tore off down the street, neither man checking to see if they were being followed.

The eerie silence which had swallowed Oakville under the indigo cloak of night started to give birth to distant screams. Inside the police station, Earl and Jones tried to ignore the horribly-familiar noises.

The sheriff stalked the open-plan office area, his face crimson with rage. "They've abandoned us, those sons-of-bitches!" he yelled. "Fuckin', goddamn, cock-suckin'–"

"Easy, Sheriff, you look like your head's going to explode." Jones lifted a weary arm and waved it at Bannister.

"How could they do this?" the sheriff demanded of the room. "Goddamn suits, how can they ignore what's happening in my town? Sons-of-bitches..."

"Maybe we should leave?" suggested Earl. "It's obvious help's not coming. And after what we've seen, I really don't think there's a lot we can do for this town."

"What about the other people like us, who've managed to avoid the infection, or whatever it is?" Bannister spoke to Earl, but kept his attention focused on the large windows along the far wall. Living darkness gently crept its way up the outside of the glass.

Jones leaned forward in his chair. "Something's obviously preventing people from wandering the streets to get here. I hate to say it, Sheriff, but–"

Lakemore cut the end of Jones's sentence off by bursting into the room, wild-eyed and shrieking hoarsely.

"Jesus!" spluttered Bannister, "I thought you left town?"

"They...they wouldn't let me," Lakemore moaned, his attention constantly snapping back in the direction of the front doors. "I've known some of the men on the blockades since kindergarten, and they pulled guns on me!" His voice trembled and whined, like he couldn't believe it.

"Enforced quarantine," Jones said. "Why am I not surprised?"

"But I'm the deputy! They can't, can't…mutiny against me!" Lakemore wailed.

"Why not? That's exactly what you did," Bannister said through gritted teeth. "And in case you've forgotten, you're not

the deputy any more–so why don'tcha put a cork in it?"

"Hang on a minute, Sheriff. He hasn't told us who he's running from," Jones pointed out. "Is it the army, Lakemore? Or the government? Is the government finally here?"

Lakemore's eyes rolled in their sockets and his jaw trembled as he shook his head. He looked like he was having a slow-motion seizure. "I seen 'em," he lamented, on the verge of tears. "I seen what came outta' the people who got sick. I tried hiding, but every house I went in had piles of skin, and these monsters..." He began to sob roughly. "One of 'em came after–"

An office window exploded inward and a black shape–all uncommon angles and irregular movement–launched itself at Lakemore. A multitude of black hooks sank into the screaming man, and promptly yanked him outside. It happened so fast that the other men saw just enough of the monster to make them either swear repeatedly, or vomit. Earl was in the latter camp, and retched harshly into a wastepaper bin.

"Holy fuck!" Bannister's jaw hung open in sheer astonishment. "Did you see the size of that thing?"

"We can't stay here," Earl's voice was muffled as he wiped his mouth, "if they can break through glass that easily."

"Earl's right." Jones stared at the jagged hole in the window, and at the carpet littered with blood-stained glass. "Who's to say another creature won't smash through and drag one of us away screaming within the next few minutes?"

"We can move downstairs, hole-up in the morgue," Bannister said.

Jones shook his head. “They’ll come through the vents. And despite the amount of ammunition in this place, I really don’t think we’ll manage to survive the night if a lot of creatures decide to lay siege to us.”

“He’s right, Sheriff,” Earl agreed, reluctantly. “Let’s get in a car and get the hell outta Oakville.”

“Sons-of-bitches,” Bannister mumbled, lighting up a cigarette. “All right, but I ain’t leaving here until we’ve loaded up with guns an’ ammo.”

The three men were no more than two meters from the patrol car, when one of the monsters appeared from behind another vehicle.

It appeared to be comprised of a central shape, irregular in form, its surface completely covered in things not unlike chitinous mushrooms. These were low and flat, and looked to rotate to a small degree on ball joints which fastened onto the central form. When the thing moved every “mushroom cap” swivelled in off-kilter circles, completely independent of each other. The resultant whorl of movement produced an intense feeling of nausea and dizziness in the three men as they watched it–as the method of locomotion seemed a wholly unnatural process, at least by human standards.

Mantis-like claws occasionally flexed and buckled away from the main body, to snap at the air or seek additional purchase on the terrain, from places limbs are not typically expected to grow. A pale, rubbery shape also flexed and expunged anemone feelers from random gaps between the

“mushrooms”. These in turn surrounded a wide, tight-looking muscle-mouth. After several puckering movements a secondary form could be seen deep inside, but never long enough to guess what it was. Its skin–if that’s what it was–bore a slick, oil-like veneer, which swirled dizzily with iridescent colour.

“There is no way that belongs on this planet,” Earl said, his voice little more than a cracked whisper.

“Damn straight,” Bannister replied, cocking the pump action shotgun in his hands, before shooting the creature at point-blank range. It inflated the anemone-mouth like an air bladder from between invisible joints, and expelled the things that’d writhed inside it.

“Jesus...” Bannister choked, staring down at the stringy heap of tendons, nerves, eyeballs, and brain. “Please don’t tell me those are the remains of the person this came from...” The sheriff sounded like he might finally throw-up. He nudged the body parts with the tip of his gun, uttering a surprisingly high-pitched shriek when they rapidly withdrew inside the creature.

“Death-throes.” Jones laughed nervously.

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Earl backed away, pulling his friends with him.

The alien buckled and flexed–the shotgun wounds filling with new, black meat.

“Fuck me,” Bannister said. “Fuck me...”

The three men hurried over to the police car. Bannister fumbled with the keys as the creature flexed new claws from its healed body. With moments to spare, the men jumped into the

vehicle as the alien lunged-rolled-writhed towards them. Bannister hit the gas, knocking the creature aside as the car screeched away from the parking lot, and on through the chaos of Oakville.

"Goddamn–" The sheriff went into another tirade of abuse when the car headlights revealed the impossibly tall barrier blocking the way out of town. "They can't fuckin' get away with this," Bannister snarled, getting out of the car.

"Hey, you damn cowards!" he shouted up at the wall. "We haven't been infected! Let us out, goddamnit!"

"They won't believe you, even if they're listening," Jones said, stepping beside Bannister.

Earl wound his window down. "Guys, get back in the car. I think I've just figured something out. They don't like li–"

"Just a minute, Earl." Bannister's attention was focused on the wall.

Neither he nor Jones saw the aliens until they were surrounded; the creatures emerged from the surrounding night in a rotating-whirling-clacking waltz of death. The sheriff managed to blast one with the shotgun before it grabbed him, but Jones had left his gun in the car, and hardly managed so much as a scream before he was pulled away into the darkness.

Earl clambered through the gap between the front seats, determined to get behind the wheel.

"Help me! Earl..."

He recognized that voice. Slowly, very slowly, he turned and felt true horror grasp him in its frozen claws. An alien

stood beside the car, an eyeball and brain forced through invisible joints between the fungus-like, bony flesh.

"Linda Jenkins?" he asked incredulously.

"It's killing me! Earl....help *me*!" the thing shouted, from an absent mouth.

"What...what..." he stammered, unable to process the situation. Linda used to babysit Lilly, and Earl had known the teenager since she, herself, had been eight years old.

"*I'm inside it now!* And I can't escape..." Linda's disembodied voice buzzed–each word sounding as if it'd been cut and pasted from a completely separate sentence.

Earl understood, too late, that it had pulled this trick to distract him from the alien which had moved towards the passenger side to take advantage of the car door Jones had left open.

He yelled and struggled as multiple hook-like appendages swarmed over him. He reached frantically for the rifle that lay on the back seat, but the creature's many-limbed grip was too strong, and it dragged Earl from the vehicle in seconds.

As he lay on his back in the dirt, coughing and struggling, the alien flipped on top of him and used a spread of hooks to force Earl's mouth wide open. Several smaller claws prodded inside his mouth, exploring the feel of his tongue and teeth. Tears leaked from the corners of Earl's eyes as the creature–content with its examination–rose up and grew new claws. Helpless, choking, and sobbing, Earl watched as the alien raised a hooked limb, and then swung it deep into its own body. Shuddering, the creature pulled the claw loose, releasing a

thick, black torrent of blood directly into Earl's mouth.

He cursed and spat, suddenly aware that the monster had released him. Earl stuck his fingers down his throat and vomited. He wiped excess blood, and puke, from his face and realized that he was alone.

By the time he reached his house, Earl wasn't sure how much of him was still human. He could feel movement deep within him, swirling around. He staggered inside the house as the first colors of morning stained the sky, no longer caring what had happened to Jones, or the sheriff, or the rest of the town. Almost on auto-pilot, Earl lurched through his house– drawing curtains, locking windows and doors. Finally, in the study, he fell into the chair by the desk.

The fresh sheet of A4 in the typewriter no longer mocked him, and instead served to focus his mind. There was one final thing he was determined to put right, before he completely succumbed to the black horror growing inside him.

With a supreme force of will, he picked up the phone and dialed. A groggy, irritated woman answered with, "This better be good. Have you any idea what time it is?"

"Jenny?" he wheezed–each vowel, each consonant, weighing a ton.

"Earl? Is that you?"

"Jenny..." he choked on her name, his voice starting to break up. "I am sorry. I am so sorry."

He dropped the handset and slumped in the chair, his ex-wife's tinny voice demanding "Earl? Earl!"

Earl ignored her, closed his eyes, and waited.

Common Ground

by Lance Schonberg

I can never tell how long it's been since I've been home. It could be a couple of weeks or even a couple of years; time doesn't feel quite right on a Plriki ship. In hyperspace, time is non-constant. If a second has passed while looking at your watch, that doesn't mean it has outside the ship. The opposite is also true. It might have been a week, or not. I'm not sure any human really understands the theory, never mind the reality, but I'm told the equations balance.

Colors battle in the wide, round passages of the roving ships, and the ocular nerves of non-Plriki passengers and crew become casualties of the bizarre décor. They try to tone things down in the parts of the ship we poor humans–unable to appreciate proper beauty–spend most of our time. It's common to come across a wall, deck plate, or door painted in a fuchsia and neon green plaid pattern. Thankfully we're allowed to decorate our own quarters; mine are almost entirely white from floor to ceiling. Drives the Plriki nuts, so much that none of them have visited more than once.

The ship cruises through hyperspace most of the time, and the Plriki apparently find the sight stimulating in an almost narcotic way, but they rarely pull back the blinds, and never in the human sections. I'm told we aren't developed enough–as my ancestors heard for centuries–and just a glimpse will drive a

human insane.

Never being able to see outside, it's hard to tell if any time has passed. The only proof that we've gone anywhere at all is the difference in scenery at either end of the trip. Having instruments prove things doesn't qualify; they're Plriki instruments.

I felt an elbow jab in my back as I pulled my beige suit on in the main airlock. Breckenridge grinned at me, eyes crinkling up around the edges, and jerked her head to one side. I refused to look. I knew better.

Without bothering to tell us, some joker had opened the outer door, leaving nothing but a millimeter-thin force field to hold back the hard void, a force field you can walk through with no resistance. I don't trust it. A flimsy little bit of energy holding back the universe? No way. One little power failure, and then where would I be? Sucking vacuum. For a few seconds, anyway.

I checked the seals on my gloves. "Bitch. You just want to see me jump."

"Every chance I get." Her grin grew, disappearing for a moment as she pulled her helmet on. I swore–not quite under my breath–and copied her, exhaling when the seal hissed. The suit, made by humans, I could trust. I looked around. Everyone else was ready to go. Last again. Surprise.

Chinning the group frequency, I gave my standard speech. "All right, people, you know the drill. Get moving, and let's all try to come back in one piece." It wasn't much of a speech, and not very inspiring, but it's been a tradition on board as long as

I've been Salvage Chief.

Breckenridge slipped through the field a half step before me, and turned on her suit jets to pick up a bit of a lead. As Team Second, her job was to secure a foothold and ensure no dangerous defensive systems were in place for when the rest of the team arrived. I fired my jets and locked my eyes on our destination, to avoid thinking about the emptiness around me.

Half of a kilometer away, a derelict ship hung in space like an insectaphobe's nightmare–a giant, wingless wasp with a dozen or so extra legs. Huge multi-paned windows perched atop the front section, reflecting a little starlight, but dark inside. Three sets of triplet antennae sprouted behind them, the ones in the center twice as long as their flanking sets. The rear section curved downward to create a convincing stinger. Between the two sections, the cylindrical hull tapered to only a few meters wide. The legs clustered in groups of three, arching gracefully inward and spaced almost evenly on both sections.

In my twenty years of service, I'd boarded ninety-seven abandoned starships–the wasp making ninety-eight. With the vast, empty distances involved, the discovery of a derelict ship should be a rare and exciting experience, but after the first few it takes something really special to write home about.

The region of space that humans and Plriki grew up in has been home to multiple star-faring species for over eight hundred thousand years. An awful lot of ships–and more than a few civilizations–have gone missing, and the Plriki actively look for them. They're not a hands-on people and they're pretty shy until they've gotten used to you, awkward with any social any

interaction. I think Plriki even give Plriki problems most of the time. They are, however, insatiably curious, and maintain a large fleet with the primary goals of exploration and contact.

Since the Plriki are timid and won't go poking things themselves, they hire humans to do it for them. Of course, they watch us from a distance for forty or fifty years first. I guess they wanted to make sure we weren't going to eat them, or something.

It's a strange partnership, but after thirty-odd years, there's a human Contact–Salvage Crew on every ship in the Plriki fleet. Mostly Salvage. Yeah, Contact is also more or less our job–too scary for the bosses to want to be directly involved–but it doesn't happen very often. I've done five. There are a lot of missing ships out there. If you add them up, galactic society, such as it is, probably loses more ships than we find. For the Plriki, every derelict ship was new, filled with potential learning and experience. For the salvage team, most of them were more or less the same. This one was new in the Plriki sense, but maybe not so much for us.

Breckenridge floated next to the pre-selected airlock hatch, casually hanging onto a magplug with one finger, letting her feet drift.

She smiled. "All clear. No active defenses present. Hull composition confirmed. What took you so long?"

I set my own magplug and frowned until she wrapped her whole hand around hers to steady her orientation. "Acknowledged," She said.

Time to check in. The rest of the squad hung twenty meters

or so off in space. Standard Procedure required them to wait until the hatch was opened before they could touch down, as if the short distance would protect them. A serious explosion could damage the Plriki ship, but that had only happened once in Fleet history.

"Control, this is boarding party. All quiet, repeat quiet. Hull confirmed as an iron-aluminum-titanium composite." Checking the hull was a silly ritual; Plriki sensors could give you the exact composition of a pea sized asteroid a light second away. Our suit sensors weren't that accurate with something you held in your hand. There was nothing we could scan from outside the ship that we hadn't known hours ago. Just another anal Plriki custom.

"Acknowledged, boarding party. You may proceed." I tried to attach a name to the quiet voice, but it was hard. Most Plriki sound nearly the same through the translator. It wasn't worth trying to understand their duty cycle–it changed according to some arcane and complicated set of rules–but I tried to memorize the roster a few days in advance. If I had the right day, it should be Rik'talik'nor.

"Thank you, Rik."

"Warm light, boarding party."

I nodded to Breckenridge. "See anything that looks like airlock controls?"

She snorted. "Do I look like a termite? The comp thinks it's got things worked out."

"You've got the torch handy, then?"

"Of course."

"Then GA."

She traced a path with her finger to locate the exact spot the computer wanted, next to the octagonal hatch, and then pressed her wrist to it. We waited while her computer calculated. Lights flashed and it transferred a little juice and signal into the surface of the hull. I felt light vibrations through the magplug as eight triangles slid back to make a hole in the ship. It was completely dark inside, of course.

Her face split in a grin. "Cool. Computer knew what it was doing for once."

I grunted and chinned my helmet light to look inside an airlock that would comfortably fit three people in suits. "Hope it works as well on the inner lock when this one's closed. Transmit the commands to the rest of us and we'll go in two by two. You and me; assigned pairs follow."

We pulled ourselves inside as Chiu and Wilkinson moved in to grab the planted magplugs. In a repeat performance, Breckenridge's computer closed the outer lock, sealing off the stars. My helmet light didn't show much. She repeated the procedure once more and the inner lock opened.

I wondered if it would have looked as nightmarish fully lit. Maybe it was fully lit. It didn't pay to make assumptions about the builders of any ship, even if they were standing next to you. When they'd been dead and gone for hundreds or even thousands of years, assumptions could be lethal.

Considering the ship's external appearance, I suppose the internal view shouldn't have surprised me. The floor was more or less smooth, but a huge variety of bumps and lumps jutted

out from the walls and ceiling of the hexagonal corridor. None were sharp enough to puncture a suit, at least none of the ones we could see, and we had no reason to believe that the rest of the ship would be anything like the corridor near the airlock.

I straightened out of an unconscious slouch. Two meters of clearance to the ceiling–tight but tall enough that everyone could walk upright. Well, Hurtig might have had to duck some of the bumps.

My partner looked at her wrist computer. "Barely 100 Kelvin in here. Air has too little oxygen and too much CO2. We could breathe it, but not manage any real physical activity, like standing up."

"Nice." Still a lot warmer than it should be. Residual radiation? Environmental controls still struggling to keep things warm? I looked around while we waited for the air lock to cycle. Too much shadow. I turned on the rest of my externals. They'd drain batteries faster, but would take care of the immediate darkness. Breckenridge did the same. At least there was gravity. It felt almost two thirds normal.

We took slow, delicate steps to make space for the following teams, scanners set on maximum sensitivity as always. You couldn't turn them down, and we paid a lot of attention to them; the last thing we needed was for some long forgotten booby trap or decontamination device to spring out of nowhere bent on killing or sterilizing something.

Eventually we all made it inside. Standard procedure called for the entire team to follow the corridor until it split off. One team followed the left branch, while the rest continued on as

close to the same path as possible. This went on until everyone operated in pairs. Decisions after that point were made at the whim of each pair with the help of the mapping software.

Our suit computers functioned as a network, building a map of the ship as we explored. It usually took a few days, but eventually we'd create a schematic of an entire ship. I could tell the wasp would take longer than usual.

I wished for a standard 'Do I turn left or right to get where I want to go?' maze, but almost everything sloped, and junctions usually had either three or six corridors meeting. I didn't stop and wonder about the significance of that, instead I hoped the mapping software could get things to match up.

The Plriki might have protocols for everything, but two decades of experience with Plriki tech reminded me that it didn't deal well with the unexpected. When something came along that didn't fit the protocols, the Plriki on-site tried to adapt. Sometimes people–generally humans or other employees–got hurt figuring out those adaptations. Sometimes people died.

Ninety-seven previous boardings had given me an itch in the back of my skull I couldn't scratch. If something happened, it was my job to see that we got away with just scrapes and bruises. I'd lost four people during my career and they still poked into my dreams once in a while.

I don't like it when we split down into working pairs too quickly. If someone gets into trouble, it takes longer to get help. Seven minutes after the last airlock cycle, we'd spread out far enough to make me uncomfortable. Twenty-one minutes and

fourteen seconds into the boarding, Groenwald and Sheckten found the first corpse.

"Jesus H. fucking Christ in a god damned jetpack!" Groenwald broke over the radio, his voice two octaves higher than normal.

"Motherfucker," said Sheckten. A long stream of curses followed and I pictured the little man's eyes bugging out.

I spoke over Groenwald's indrawn breath. "Team Five, report. Do you require assistance?"

Sheckten went on for a few seconds as if I hadn't spoken, but Groenwald tried to answer. "Fuck, Chief! It's a- god damn. Christ. It's a, I guess it's a native. One of the crew."

"It's a fucking nightmare, Chief." Sheckten finally pulled a deep breath in. "Christ, I think I pissed myself." No one laughed. That would come later.

"Do you require assistance, Team Five?" We'd all seen weird alien corpses before; it's part of the job. What had them so spooked?

"Uh...no, sir. It's pretty dead. Has been for a long time I think." Groenwald drew a loud, deep breath. "Cameras running. It's a–a bug, sort of. Would have been about two and a half meters long and maybe one and a half tall standing up. Six, eight, ten limbs, size variable. Four legs, two arms, and two sets that seem to transition between. Mottled black and green carapace. Spikes all over its body. Two sets of, um, mandibles. Six eyes, the two largest facing forwards. Same number of antenna. Mass when alive estimated in the vicinity of three hundred kilos, but it's desiccated, dried out. I'd say mummified

if it were, well, if it weren't a bug."

"And there's a big freaking hole through its head!" Sheckten sounded steadier, but still stressed.

I heard Groenwald's eyes roll. "I was getting to that."

"Yeah, I know. Chief, I'm looking right through its head. Ragged hole bigger than my fist. No burn marks. Looks physical to me. Stains on the floor, I think, but it's hard to tell in this light."

"You guys okay?"

Groenwald's voice sank back to normal. "Yeah. A little damp, but I'll live."

I looked at Breckenridge. She gave an exaggerated shrug. We'll find more, she meant. "Fine. Flag it on the map and take a minute to get your heart rates down, and then get back to work. Everyone else be on the lookout. Ship this big doesn't have a crew of one."

A light blinked twice inside my helmet. I pulled up an image on one side of my faceplate, looked at the creature as we started moving again, and then turned it off. Ugly beast, and I didn't need the distraction.

Part of my mind worked to form opinions our bosses would ignore, unless they reached the same conclusions. The ship looked like an insect to us, but obviously wasn't modeled on the crew. Aerodynamics didn't count for much in space, normal or hyper, so most species went with what they found aesthetically pleasing. Plriki liked large rounded curves, circles and balls, inside and out. Humans went for geometry and aerodynamic lines– at least in what we had–with less decorative

and more functional interiors.

What did this ship tell me about its builders? Not a whole fuck of a lot. Far more data needed.

Over the next four hours, every team found a couple of corpses, all of them killed the same way: a large puncture through the head. Did they kill each other? Maybe they'd been boarded by something bigger and meaner. We should have been able to tell if there had been a battle. Any weapons would leave traces in spite of the bizarre construction. It looked like they'd all died where they stood, sat, whatever.

We had less than four percent of the ship mapped. It would be a large multi-shift job to find all of the nooks and crannies. I had some time to figure things out while the monkey in the back of my brain worked to come up with nightmare scenarios. What could have killed these aliens so neatly and cleanly? They had predator written all over them–as plain as the smallest spike in their carapaces–but something had wandered through the vast ship and put a hole in every head.

I dropped to one knee and looked through the third empty head Breckenridge and I found. There were cracks in the surrounding chitin, and dried out tissue inside, some of it turned to dust. Breathing on it would probably finish the job.

It hadn't fallen over when it died, not completely, but slumped forward so that eight limbs supported its body, the largest eyes staring down at the floor. I rose into a high crouch, trying to compare heights. "Weird. Exit wound is a little smaller than the entrance. Whatever killed this thing, stood right in

front of it."

"So?" She didn't quite sigh. The Plriki would decide what was important. Map, mark, and get out with interesting trinkets; that was her job. I had the added responsibilities of paperwork and looking after everyone. But I was curious. I wanted to learn, to know. It might keep me alive sometime.

"So something stood in front of this dominant predator and not only did it hold still long enough to have a hole driven through its head, it didn't resist." I knew better than to ask if it made her think. Breckenridge focused on getting the job done, and getting back to the safety of the ship with minimal thinking involved.

It did make me think–and worry–even if millennia had passed between their deaths and our arrival. Mysteries needed to be solved. "I think it knew."

Breckenridge didn't respond. She ignored me and jerked her head toward the next junction. "The center passage seems to lead upwards. I think we're getting close to the eyes." Those big, dark, multi-faceted eyes we'd seen from outside. What would the universe look like from the inside?

I stood. "Lead on."

A dozen corpses lined the window. Each rested on six or eight limbs, primary eyes facing outward. Each had the same puncture wound, but unlike the rest we'd found, these had been hit from behind. With eyes in the backs of their heads, they should have seen it coming. Why didn't the second react to the death of the first, or the third to the death of the second? They

all stood there, staring at the stars, waiting to die.

I looked above their heads, out at the same stars and the Plriki starship, gleaming silver in the reflected light of a not-too-distant nebula. What sense did it make?

Holding up my fist to compare it with the round hole in another insect's head, I jumped when a scream speared through my helmet. I couldn't put a name to the voice, hearing nothing but pain and terror. Training and long years of experience kept adrenaline from ruling my brain. "All teams report!" I fought against the impulse to move before I knew what direction to move in.

Breckenridge threw a map projection onto the round grey wall beside us, highlighting current positions with yellow dots. As each team checked in she switched their color to green. Team Seven stubbornly remained yellow.

"Seven, report." Silence except my own breathing and pounding heartbeat. "Xian, Collins. Respond, please." Still nothing. Even static would have been nice. "Five, you're closest. Please move to meet Seven. We're on the way."

"Groenwald acknowledging."

I looked at the map. Even keeping to known paths, we needed at least fifteen minutes to get there, maybe twenty. Groenwald and Sheckten only needed five if they moved quickly. I sucked in a deep breath and made another decision. "All other teams–hold position pending further instructions. Code Seventeen, authorization Baker Three-Three-Seven."

Holding up my hands, I watched two rings of small metal

tubes grow out of the wrists of my suit. Plriki regulations didn't allow salvage personnel much in the way of offensive capability. Shockers might or might not be non-lethal, but they were better than hands and feet. I'd never used one outside of a practice cabin.

Breckridge's eyes–always wide–lit like saucers in the dim light. I shook my head to cut off the coming question. "Call Control. Let whoever's on duty know what we know. But do it on the move."

"Got it." Her mouth set and we started off–as fast as I felt safe–through the twisty, claustrophobic corridors. "Breckenridge to Control. We have a situation. Please acknowledge."

"Groenwald reporting, Chief. Xian's dead. No sign of Collins."

My stomach clenched and I tried to keep my voice level. "Cause of death?"

"It's hard to say. There's a lot of blood. Bunch of suit punctures. Lot of blood. I just–I don't know. He's dead." There was the snap crack of a helmet seal, then came retching sounds.

We continued moving. "Sheckten, acknowledge."

"Ah fuck, Chief. I found Collins. The back of her suit is torn open and there's a lot of blood, but I think she's breathing. Yeah. Yeah, she's still alive, but I can't tell how bad things are. And it's cold in here."

I tried to picture Breckenridge's map projection. "Three and Eight move to assist Five. Everyone else regroup at the

entrance point."

We'd closed less than half the distance. My helmet projected an arrow at the junction ahead, pointing us toward the left corridor of the three choices. It sloped downwards, when I knew we needed to go up, but it wasn't a good time to fight with the software. Big blank areas still made up most of the map.

"This is Eight! I've got movement!"

Movement. Corpses everywhere, Xian dead, Collins wounded, and movement. Something killed the crew on this ship a long time ago. Dried out, desiccated, they weren't going anywhere. Could the thing that killed them still be alive? "Report, Team Eight. What do you see?"

I heard Keene swallow. "Don't know, Chief. Something was in the shadows down one corridor, but now it's going the other way. Sounded like a horse galloping on metal. Software predicts it's heading in your direction."

Oh joy. "We'll keep an eye. You get to-"

I heard the pulsed whine of a Shocker discharge but couldn't tell if it came from over the radio or from somewhere nearby. We started running, working hard to stay low, and I hoped for nothing exciting on the floor. Between breaths, I tried to get Keene to answer. I thought I heard him swear and then someone yelled, maybe him.

Breckenridge started to pull ahead; her long legs giving her an edge even in the lower gravity. She reached the next junction before me and went down the center tube when my helmet pointed up and right. I hadn't heard her reprogram for Eight's

location.

Another Shocker discharged and a howl came from Breckenridge. I almost dove down the corridor after her. Half a dozen paces beyond the junction, a sharp corner turned into a large, bright area, brighter than any so far, so bright that it almost hurt.

Maybe the creature standing over my partner had focused the light. Did I say dominant predator? Damn. More like unstoppable killing machine, something out of a bad horror vid. Why did it look so much bigger than the dead ones?

It wrapped its lower limbs across Breckenridge's chest and arms. She kicked hard, unable to do anything but snarl. I'd built a mantis image of the bugs, meeting death stoically, and sinking peacefully into eternity. But this one, this live one–apparently untouched by age–with its carapace gleaming, couldn't be mistaken for peaceful. Arms drawn back like spears, it seemed like some primitive being, bent on killing prey or destroying an enemy. Half-frozen rivulets of blood, brilliant red next to the dark chitin, ran in jagged lines from the razor fingers past its elbow joints.

With eyes facing every direction, I didn't doubt it watched me raise both arms. "Back off." How could words or tone of voice matter? Verbal communication in the absence of translation software would have no meaning. We had no common ground but weapons and survival.

The bug turned its head to show off its two biggest mandibles. How had it seen my stance? Keene shot and missed. It had to have known I wasn't just pointing.

With my heart pounding, we stood there long enough that my arms began to get tired. Damn. Why couldn't it just back away? We couldn't talk but there had to be some way to communicate.

Then I remembered that the bug had killed at least one of my people. Collins was critical and I didn't know what had happened to Jensen. My hands started to tighten. I knew Breckenridge's suit would protect her enough that she wouldn't get much more than a strong tingle. No one would blame me, and the Plriki would be glad not to have a guest who could interfere with their salvage rights.

Behind the bug, a light bounced and jiggled down one of the corridors. Someone was running this way. I opened my mouth to shout a warning. Why was it so hard to go back to the airlock? The bug jerked its head to face the incoming light. It made a series of sounds like a hyperactive seagull and started to stab down at Breckenridge with one arm.

I clenched my hands into fists, triggering the Shockers. In the practice cabin, you can hear the low hum ripple into a high whine before the discharge. It took about a tenth of a second. I always noticed it, but not this time.

Both discharges hit the bug, one in the side and the other in the abdomen. The stabbing arm, instead of driving into Breckenridge's chest, dragged across her lower ribs and stomach, and sliced her suit open, pulling a short scream from her.

Its muscles released into a leap, locked up, and the bug crashed to the deck, the lighter gravity stretching out the fall. It lay

there twitching, clawed fingers curled and uncurled, over and over, as it lay there twitching. Long seconds passed before I felt safe enough to check Breckenridge.

My stomach protested at the sight of the blood. Impossible amounts of blood leaked out of her suit. I didn't like the glazed look in her eyes, but I swallowed hard and tried to smile at her. One eye twitched shut and she smiled back. "Hurts like hell. Cold, too."

"Wouldn't have guessed. We need to get you back to the ship."

She closed her eyes, nodding. "Yeah. 'S'good idea, but need rest first."

"Go ahead. We'll carry you."

It took seventeen days, working in groups of four, to map the entire ship down to the last service crawl way. Defense protocols remained engaged whenever people were on the wasp, but there was only one more injury. Michaels broke an arm trying to reach a service hatch behind some kind of locker; it fell on her when she slipped.

Breckenridge returned to duty after a week. Collins needed an extra month of regen. Keene, Jensen, and Xian went into stasis pods. My dead. Four in twenty years, all from stupid accidents. Three more in less than twenty minutes. You learn to trust your instincts, but sometimes you can't be careful enough.

No more live aliens appeared, only the dead. Once we certified the lack of lurking monsters, a quarantine shuttle crossed the gap. We filled it with small, moveable artifacts, and

added several corpses– including the only intact one, the freshest one. We left the ship a few tons lighter and with a claim buoy attached.

While we loaded, Rik'talik'nor stood with two other Plriki. The three visibly quivered, bulbous faces gleaming, too-round eyes stretched wider than I'd ever seen. "Exceedingly warm light, Chief."

Not nearly warm enough, but I nodded inside my helmet. "My job, Rik, but thanks. Hope we'll learn some interesting things." The Plriki are pretty honest. I'm sure everything gets shared according to the Treaty, but how much of the information eventually made sense? Could it possibly be worth the price paid?

"We are certain to. It is a pity you had to kill the single survivor, but we will be able to reconstruct their entire physiology." His huge head bobbed. "And their technology is most unlike ours. A great deal to be learned."

I stepped out of the field and off the shuttle, grabbing a convenient magplug. "Yeah," I said to the closing hatch. "A great deal to be learned." Just not what I wanted to know.

In a couple of years, Earth will have its own ships–three to start with and more later. I've been offered Salvage Chief on one of them, the Champlain. Same job, better pay, and on a human vessel, with human aesthetics. I wonder how long it'll seem weird.

In the time left on my contract, there'll be plenty of boardings and landings–quiet missions, I hope. No dead, no

wounded. Nice and boring. Not like the last one.

Rik gave me the official estimate: two thousand years, plus or minus two hundred. Groenwald and Sheckten found a small cabin near the center of the forward section. Trace gases made it a cryogenic chamber. Two thousand years in cryo isn't good for you. The Shockers probably just pushed it over the edge a little quicker.

With their round bodies, absurdly large heads, and disturbing aesthetics, the Plriki were still more or less comprehensible. Alien, but with motivations you could understand if you were willing to spend a little brain power on it. They didn't always make sense to humans, but they were always Plriki.

I had questions, too many questions. What had the bugs been like? Why was one alive when the rest had holes punched through their heads? Why did it choose to live? Why were most of the dead standing or lying in front of view ports, or the wasp's eyes? None of it made any sense.

I tried to resist all the what-if conversations. We had plenty of theories, but we'd never have enough information to decide which–if any–matched reality. Three of my people had died. I wanted to know why, to understand, so I could tell them when they turned up in my dreams.

One live bug. Hundreds of dead ones with holes through their heads. Every hole the same size, within a few millimeters–a bit less than the maximum width of their guardian's true arms.

Alien thoughts processed in alien brains, brains I couldn't hope to communicate with or understand. What would we have

in common except a dream of the stars?

It Came From Outer Space

By Mike Smith

So let's start out with a typical beginning. Shall we? One must tell the truth right? It was a dark and gloomy snow filled night. A nor'easter, as the meteorologists call a large snowstorm that crosses New England during the winter months, dumping a foot of snow everywhere. Most of the time it's easy to know when one will occur, but for someone who wasn't paying attention they wouldn't know what hit them until they were driving through it.

Eric Mendelson had expected snow for the drive north on the Massachusetts thruway, but he hadn't expected a nor'easter. He'd never liked driving in the snow, but seeing as a furniture store in New York was willing to buy fifty of his hand-made, wooden rocking chairs, he had to. Eric was a third generation, rocking chair maker – a family tradition passed down from his grandfather. Since his family usually dealt with New Englanders it surprised him to hear that someone from New York was interested in their work.

He deposited the money into his bank account and started for home, driving twenty miles-per-hour despite his worry about not being home for Christmas. Eric drives his Subaru Forrester wagon, a vehicle made to travel through the snow. Well for him, it had lasted through eight winters of heavy, New

England snow.

As a wall of snowflakes bombards the road in front of him the song “Get Stoned” by Hinder plays through the front speakers. He was never into rock songs, but listens to it anyways because his fifteen-year-old son had made him the CD, which he said “Would wake you up.”

At this point in his journey, he thinks of how his stubbornness led him to drive through a major snowstorm just to get home for the holidays. Maybe he should have stayed in New York with his brother for another day and then they could have driven home together.

What can happen during a snowstorm that completely covers the highway and creates a wall of white, so that all drivers could only see ten feet in front of their vehicles? How about two trailer tractors stuck on the side of the road and eight more accidents involving all types of other vehicles–the number Eric had seen since leaving New York City.

Once again, the rock song playing doesn’t help him from falling asleep at the wheel. He rubs his face and shakes his head, trying to focus on the space ahead of him. He thinks of how great it is that there are now snow piles on either side of the road, signaling to him that he’s in the middle. He holds the wheel firmly with one hand and stretches his other, while simultaneously letting out a large yawn. He closes his eyes for only a millisecond, but that’s all it takes for him not to notice a person walking in the middle of the road.

The moment his eyes open, he sees something traveling in the road and turns the wheel while slamming both of his feet on

the brakes. Those who have traveled in the New England states during winter know that slamming on your brakes won't help your car to stop. Eric also knows this, but instinct blocks it out, and he focuses on not hitting the person.

The Subaru smashes into a snow bank on the left side of the road after sliding fifty feet. It becomes buried only up to its lights, which made him very lucky. The car could have been buried all the way to the driver's seat. As the song "Into the Night" by Santana plays Eric moans and rests his head on the airbag, thinking of how idiotic it was to hit the brakes hard instead of tapping them. He moves the airbag enough so that he can get out, but when he reaches for the handle to open the door it opens on its own. A quick burst of cold air swarms around him, making him wish he was wearing his winter jacket. Eric looks over and there's a person wearing all black, covered with snow, standing outside the car.

"Hey mister you okay?"

Eric's eyes widen when he hears a woman's voice coming from inside the thick, winter-jacket hood. He gives her his hand and the woman helps him out. His vision takes longer than usual to adjust from the dust of the deployed airbags and the snowstorm around him. With his gloveless hands Eric scoops some snow off the roof of his car. He squishes it between his hands, making them wet and cold, and then rubs them across his face trying to clean out his eyes.

"You know it's dangerous to travel on the highway during a snow storm," Eric says without looking at the woman.

He doesn't get an answer and thinks that maybe he had

imagined the person. He blinks and notices that the woman is gone and that no one is within ten feet of him. A shiver runs across his body while the snow builds up, leaking its coldness through his sweater.

"I did not know I was on the highway," the woman's voice says.

Eric holds his arms across his chest and walks to the rear of the car. The woman is standing fifteen feet away, looking up the road. His vision clears with the assistance of the lights coming from his car and he can see the woman dressed in thick, winter clothes carrying a large hiker's bag on her back.

"What do you mean? Where did you think you are?"

"I was hiking in the woods and came across a flat area. I thought maybe I was walking across a river so I began to follow it."

"Yeah, well hiking across a river is still bad during a storm. Now are you all right? Did I hit you or anything?"

She doesn't say anything. Eric wonders if she might be crazy or something. Who in their right mind would be walking in a storm like this? The only sound comes from his boots crunching into the snow as he approaches the woman. Her hood is so thick it blocks her face.

"Where are you going if you don't mind me asking?"

"North."

"Me too. I'm going to Vermont. You?"

She pauses for a moment. It looks as if she's thinking of an answer to give him. Maybe it's because she doesn't trust him enough. She turns around and opens the front part of her hood.

Eric stares at the most perfect blonde hair and blue eyes he has ever seen on a woman. How can she be so angelic traveling through a snow storm?

"Me too," is all she says and then walks up to the driver's side of the car.

Eric shivers again, but this time it's accompanied with the urge to pee. He shakes his body, trying not to think about going to the bathroom. He'd heard about a guy that was traveling during a bad winter storm that had to pee. He relieved himself, but the pee turned to ice the moment it hit the air. He peed all over himself and almost lost his penis. Eric places the thought aside as when he sees the woman looking into the car like she's looking for something.

Eric trots up to the car and stands next to her. For a second, as she is bending down into the car, he thinks that he sees something move within the backpack.

"Excuse me but is there something I can help you with?"

The woman backs out of the car and stares at Eric as if she was guilty.

"A ride in your nice transport vehicle."

Huh? When did people start using the term "Transport vehicle" for a car? Thoughts of being warned against picking up hitchhikers enters his mind, right after the word "psychopath", but something makes him feel like he can trust her. Besides, if he were traveling in the middle of a snowstorm, he would love for someone to give him a ride.

"Okay. You can put your stuff in the back seat."

The woman looks at the back seat, behind the driver's side,

but notices Eric was referring to the back seat on the passenger's side. She nods her head and runs around the car. Once again strange thoughts race through Eric's head. He holds the driver's side door, watching as not once does she slip or slide across the snow. He wonders if she might be wearing spikes on her boots to keep her traction.

The cold air and snow start to freeze him and Eric knows he should get into his car, but the airbag doesn't want to flatten quickly enough. The woman pokes the airbag. It flattens, releasing all the air from inside. Eric moves back as the air spits everywhere. The airbag lies limply across the steering wheel. He stares at it for a moment, unsure of what to do with it. He then sees the woman gently place her backpack on the backseat. He thinks she said something to it, but it could have been the wind whistling around him. Eric shoves the airbag into the steering wheel and then sits. He feels the warm air of the heater and is glad the engine's still working.

Without really thinking he places his right arm around the passenger's seat and looks back, preparing to reverse the car out of the snow bank. Before he can place the car into reverse he remembers the woman still outside of the car. He watches as she removes her thick winter clothes. While waiting he places the car into reverse, continuing to look out the back window for passing vehicles.

Within the couple of minutes it takes for the woman to remove her winter gear and place it on the back seat with her backpack, snow has built up on the front seat. The woman sits on the pile, seeming not to mind the wet seat. She closes the

door and waits. Eric looks at her orange, turtleneck sweater and black pants, and swears that a minute ago she was wearing all brown clothes underneath her black jacket. He rubs his eyes, looks out the back window, and then tries to move the car, thinking that maybe he is a little more tired than suspected. He hears the sound of the tires spinning in the snow bank, but before he can question whether or not they'll get out the car moves backwards onto the road. Eric quickly turns the car and slows so they're facing north. He changes gears and drives on at the same pace he was driving.

A few miles down the road everything seems the same. The road continues to have the same amount of snow covering the yellow lines, the same amount of snow piled on the sides of the road where plows had came through hours ago, and the sky is the same darkness, spitting out cascades of snowflakes. Eric begins to doubt that he's even on the highway because he hasn't seen any of the bridges that usually run off the exits and cover the road. He rolls down his window and tries to see the road moving underneath him. It certainly looks like it is, but something still looks off with the road. The snow is quickly filling up the tire tracks as soon as they are made. Being strangely paranoid, Eric turns the car left and right, pretending to have hit a slick spot. He looks out his window, and then the back window and notices the tracks disappearing after ten feet.

He rolls the window up and notices the woman is staring at him. From the corner of his eyes he looks at her, and to him it looks as if she's studying his behavior and wondering why he

did the act. Eric realizes that he doesn't know her name, so he turns the volume down on the radio, which is playing "Now" by Mdfmk, thinking that she may not like the same music.

"Um, we have been traveling all this way and I don't know your name. I'm Eric."

The woman looks around as if creating a fake name.

"Alyssa."

"Nice to meet you, Alyssa."

"Yes, nice to meet you too."

Eric holds the steering wheel with both of his hands and feels that the conversation is not going any further. He watches the windshield wipers move back and forth, a little bored of the drive. Since the moment he met Alyssa he'd not been focused on the music or anything at all. He can only think about her. Not why she was in the middle of the road during a heavy snowstorm, but about her. Who she is and why does she look so familiar, and why does he feel like she's trustworthy when he's so guarded.

The CD ends and ejects from the console. Eric removes the disc and places it into a case. He doesn't take his eyes off the road as he places another CD into the player. A song cues, but a sign for a Rest Area takes Eric's attention away from the music. He doesn't want to admit that he's needed to go to the bathroom since he picked up Alyssa. Without warning, Eric turns the car and heads across the circular ramp towards the Rest Area's main building.

The Subaru pushes through the unpaved road, stopping at the barely lit building. Snow has piled high around the building

so that most of its outside lights are covered. Eric opens the door, preparing to leave, but stays seated.

"Sorry, I have to go to the bathroom. I will keep the car on unless you have to go, too?"

Alyssa looks around, thinking about it. Once again she shows that deep consideration like she has no idea what he means. The backpack twitches and they both look at it. Before Eric has even thought about why it moved, Alyssa opens the door.

"Yes I have to go to the bathroom."

As she steps out of the car and opens the back door, Eric turns the engine off. She gathers all her things as Eric notices the walkway to the building behind her is barely lit. He removes a flashlight from the glove compartment and exits the car.

Eric goes his own way towards the building while Alyssa struggles to hold her clothes and backpack. The flashlight barely illuminates where the walkway once existed. He can tell someone had shoveled or plowed several hours ago because of the clean cut sides. He shivers and takes the steps to the door, realizing that he should have brought his jacket. Eric puts the small flashlight in his mouth and pulls the door open, pushing aside a pile of snow.

When he enters the building he notices, as he taps his feet onto the red, brick floor, there are not wet spots or any indication of visitors, at least since the snowstorm. He turns the flashlight off as he passes the vending machines of soda and snacks, heading towards the Men's Restroom. The squeaking of the Men's room door opening joins the scratching sound of the

main entrance opening. Eric heads to the first stall, not thinking about it. When he turns to close the door he can see himself in the mirror. He stops for a second to look at his reflection, seeing how pale he looks and the purple bags under his eyes. The trip has strained him more than he thought it would. He smirks at himself and wonders what Alyssa thinks of him. He pulls his pants down and sits on the toilet, shaking his head.

Eric is glad that there is a separate restroom for men. He doesn't want Alyssa to think he's smelly or a slob with all the sounds and smells diffusing through the stall. As he wipes himself he wonders why he cares. He doesn't know her and doesn't care about anything she does, just as long she's not a mass murderer. Then he thinks about her backpack. He did see it move twice, right? What's in there that would make it move? A child perhaps? Then, maybe she's a kidnapper?

He finishes wiping and stands up. As he pulls his pants on, he freezes. Did he just hear the door squeak open? He slowly zips his pants and listens. Nothing. He wonders if he might have heard the Woman's Restroom door open. Eric flushes the toilet then sees the shadow of something crawling across the floor in front of his stall. He steps closer to the toilet, scared that it may be a wild animal because of how close to the ground the shadow is. He thinks about screaming to Alyssa, but if it is a wild animal, she might not be able to scare it away. He continues to watch the shadow move across the restroom floor as if looking for something. Maybe if he stays still he can convince it he's not there, but then again he just pooped and the smell is still on him.

Eric slowly places his hand on top of the stall wall and raises himself on his toes, thinking he might be able to see a reflection of the animal in the mirrors. He's not tall enough for it to work. He drops down, wondering how a wild animal would get in there in the first place. He can understand that it's warm in the building, and any animal lost in the snow would love to use it for rest, but he didn't see any wet spots signaling that something had come into the building. Eric listens for movement. He hears nothing and sees no shadows. His heart slows down and he wonders if it was his imagination, but just in case, he steps onto the toilet and looks around. There's nothing on the floor, nothing reflecting in the mirrors except for him, and no wet spots from outside. Feeling a little relieved Eric steps down and unhooks the door.

"Ahhhhhhhhh."

Eric's arms rise as he's pushed against the stall door. He tries to hold onto the walls but is flung against the door again, and on the third slam the door becomes indented. He falls to the floor with blood leaking out of his legs. He lies unconscious on the blue, tiled floor, and then something lifts him up. The shadow of a creature three feet long by two feet in diameter in the shape of a centipede moves across the floor. A low-pitched crunching comes from the restroom stall and more blood splashes across the floor. Pieces of Eric's clothes drop to the floor, landing in the blood.

The squeaking sound of the Men's Restroom door is followed by the gentle footsteps generated by Alyssa. She looks around the room, notices the blood moving across the tiled floor

from underneath the stall, smiles and licks her lips.

Outside, the snowstorm comes down heavier and piles around the Subaru wagon. The wind combined with the cold air freezes much of the snowflakes onto the glass, creating sheets of ice. The sound of two people walking across the snow barely squeezes its way through the whistling of the wind. Alyssa and Eric, wearing all black clothes walk up to the car, brush away the snow, and then enter the car. Alyssa places the empty hikers backpack in the back seat and then joins Eric in the front. The engine starts and the car comes to life, spitting smoke out of the tailpipe and beaming light across the snow. The driver's side window rolls down and Eric reaches out, lifting the windshield wiper that had frozen to the windshield. He looks at it moving back and forth, making sure he doesn't need to lift it again.

"Are you sure this body will do? Eric asks.

"Yes, these Earthlings are very well connected. Imagine all the other bodies we will get once we get to his family."

"Yes, they are tasty... but I've never had a youngling before.

"Trust me, you don't want one. The older ones are the best."

The window rolls up and the Subaru drives off. All that's left of their visit are tracks in the snow that fill up after a couple of minutes with more snow.

Jacob's Bad Day

By Justin Cyril Vokey

The first thing that Jacob Lane did when he rolled out of bed was stub his toe. The last breakfast pastry got stuck in the toaster and nearly started a fire. Five panicked minutes of searching finally enabled him to find his keys, which had somehow been placed in the refrigerator. Traffic delayed him in dropping his son off to school and an accident on the interstate ate up even more of his time. Jacob finally walked into work forty minutes late and logged into the phone system.

Two hours of listening to customers whine and complain about their bills, their late fees–including one woman who screamed at the top of her lungs for a good twenty minutes about how terrible and corrupt he was, and how his company was robbing her blind. He finally calmed her down, only to find out who she was. She hung up saying blissfully, "Oh my goodness, I called the wrong number."

Jacob managed to spill coffee on his pants on his first break. Almost immediately upon signing in to the overburdened phone queue again, he was blessed with the opportunity to tell hundreds of irate customers to call back later. The server had gone down. Again. Being given permission to sign out for his thirty minute lunch was almost like an answered

prayer. Well, at least it seemed that way until he got to the employee lunchroom and discovered both microwaves were out of commission. The microwave pot pie he had brought with him would remain a useless, frozen block. Of course–with just thirty minutes for lunch–there was no way he would be able to go anywhere else for food and be able to get back to log in to the damn phone.

Jacob pulled every bit of change out of his pockets, muttered a few choice curse words, then went to his desk to look for any coins that might have escaped being scavenged the last time this happened. Five minutes of looking and he discovered he was fifteen cents short of buying anything available in the snack machines. He almost cried. Then, as he was walking back to the lunchroom, he spied a shiny new quarter on the floor.

Finally, thought Jacob, a piece of good luck for a change. He bent over to pick up the quarter and the door to the conference room next to him swung open, the metal handle striking him right in the temple. He toppled backwards, his vision blurring and his head starting to protest painfully. He struggled to hold on to awareness until he heard a voice exclaim, "Cool, a quarter. Now I can get something from the snack machine." The world went dark.

Jacob awoke thanks to a really foul smell. His manager was waving a little glass tube of something god-awful under his nose to wake him up. "C'mon Lane, get back to work. I have stuff to take care of." The unbelievable bastard that was his boss then left him there on the floor, and Jacob stood up shakily by himself and

staggered back to his cubicle.

Jacob sat down and started to feel overwhelmingly nauseated. He bent over and threw up nasty bits of bile and the partially undigested fast food from breakfast into his garbage can. He was amazed–yet somehow not surprised–that the cold, four hour old half cup of cheap coffee provided to hourly employees actually tasted worse than his own vomit.

At two o'clock Jacob, along with thirty or so other cubicle slaves, were pulled into a conference room and notified that their jobs had been outsourced to India. He and his former colleagues were given a paycheck that covered them through the end of the week. Security then escorted him to his desk and watched suspiciously as he picked through six years of work life. A small box filled with personal items later, and the security officer escorted him out the door. The security guard informed him this was to prevent outsourced employees from doing mischief on their computers. Not that they could have anyway, since the damn server had never managed to come back up. By the time Jacob got home he was convinced that even God couldn't make his day any worse.

His wife was in the kitchen. She stood up, looked him up and down and said in a sweet, soft voice, "Oh honey, what happened? You look just awful."

"I have had the worst day of my life. Absolutely the worst." Jacob sat down in his chair and ran his hand through his hair, of course hitting the knot on his head from earlier. Wincing, he continued, "I was late to work, the server was down, I couldn't eat lunch. Then, I got a concussion and my job was outsourced to

India. My head hurts and I'm starving."

"Oh darling, you poor dear." Jacob's wife walked behind him and began rubbing his shoulders in a sensual manner. If felt rather nice. He wasn't sure why she was being so nice; it was rather out of character for her. "You know Jacob, I'm rather hungry myself. Why don't we go to the bedroom." She bent over and gently nibbled on his ear. In a low, husky voice she said, "There's nothing in the kitchen I want to eat." Her hands moved from his shoulders and started to rub his chest. Suddenly, Jacob didn't feel so worn down.

Grinning slightly, Jacob followed his wife, tearing off his tie, then his shirt. He had to hop a bit while removing his shoes and pants, but was fully naked by the time he reached the bed. His wife was reclining in front of him, wearing nothing but a half smile. Her body looked incredible, better than he remembered it, and her lips were just slightly open in an inviting manner. Her expression was full of lust, almost hungry. Jacob climbed on top her, his lips closing upon hers. There was an odd scent in the air - unusual, yet arousing. He quickly entered her, and as he thrust he couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted his wife so badly.

Jacob's wife wrapped her arms and legs around him, holding him against her. Her skin was hot, almost burning to the touch; he had never felt as much passion for her as he did right then. She kissed, and then licked his face. Her hands rubbed his back, and as he started to approach orgasm, she whispered softly in his ear,"Oh Jacob, you taste so good, and I'm so hungry."

Suddenly the warmth of her skin started to burn, and Jacob watched in horror as her face deformed and began to melt. His

erection wilted instantly, and he struggled to get free but he was trapped. Her body started to melt and flow around him, and what used to be fair skin changed into a translucent gel. The thing that he thought was his wife reached forward with what had been her face and wrapped its goo around his head. The burning became agony, and he thrashed in terror and pain. The gelatinous thing that was once his wife slowly enveloped his convulsing body.

It sat still on the bed as its digestive juices dissolved his flesh, absorbing nutrients. The parts of Jacob that couldn't be assimilated, floated through the mound of goo. Bones were pushed out of the thing's gelatinous body, falling here and there on top of or to the side of the bed. Jacob's perfectly clean skull was pushed out last, the tasty brain fully absorbed. The skull rolled off the bed and bounced across the carpet, a few of Jacob's teeth rattling inside the empty brain case.

The creature started to ripple and slowly re-assumed the shape of Jacob's wife.

It calmly opened the closet door, then carefully picked up Jacob's bones and piled them neatly next to another set of bones that had been set aside late in the morning. Then, the creature closed the closet and left the bedroom. A protective layer that perfectly imitated clothing wrapped itself around the things body as it entered the living room. Then, it reached behind the couch and pulled out an oddly shaped metallic device and pressed a button on the side. It beeped quietly.

"Qulorch, dear, how are you doing?"

Qulorch tossed back her long, blonde hair. "Oh Grukoglix,

darling, I discovered the most delightful feeding spot. You just have to come visit this planet. I've only just arrived, but I promise you the dominant life forms here are exquisitely delicious." Qulorch walked back towards the bedroom. "They are pathetically easy to mimic, and if you exude a few pheromones they become most eager to enter your embrace."

"They must be difficult to consume, then." The voice of Grukoglix sounded skeptical.

"Not at all. They have no real teeth to speak of. No claws. No armor plating. No poison. Nothing. And they taste divine. I'll send you the coordinates. Tell anyone you want about the place, there are billions of them here."

"Sounds too good to be true, Qulorch. What about their technology?" Grukoglix's voice wanted to be convinced.

"Oh darling, their science is so primitive, so you don't even need to worry about being detected. I mean, they are still using projectile hand weapons."

Grukoglix laughed and said, "All right, Qulorch, you've sold me. Send me the location and I'll round up some friends and see if we can't make a picnic of it."

Qulorch looked at the digital timing device on the wall. "Grukroglix, darling, I'll buzz you later. Right now I have to let you go, it's almost time for dessert." The alien blob turned housewife pressed the same button on the side of the device and tossed it onto the bed, then walked to the front and sat down on the reclining device.

Soon, a door opened and a small boy walked into the house.

“Hi Mom!”

“Oh baby, come here and give your mommy a hug.” The small boy ran happily to the thing that looked like his mother. Qulorch smiled as it put its arms around the child and said, “I swear, you are so sweet I could just eat you up.”

The Conservators

By Paul A. Freeman

In a holding centre on the outskirts of London, Michael Stephens glanced impatiently at his watch, then back to the open bedroom door. “Are you ready yet, honey? The hover shuttle leaves in twenty minutes.”

Meanwhile, the last humans on Earth were in the process of being evacuated from Heathrow Spaceport’s Terminal Seven to Epsilon 5 – an Earth-like planet in a distant star system.

“I’m just putting my make-up on,” Clarissa Stephens called back.

Michael made a face in the direction of the bedroom, his contorted countenance eliciting a fit of giggles from his ten year old daughter, Kim.

“It’s not as if we’re going to a posh restaurant or a night at the opera,” Michael grumbled under his breath.

He recalled the years of penury his family had endured, that period of hopelessness as they waited for death on a poisoned planet. There had been no makeup then–just dust, and grime, and constant hunger pains. Thank goodness for the timely arrival of the Conservators.

Noticing how strangely Kim was regarding him in his introspection, Michael asked her to switch on the plasma-vision.

She did as instructed.

"Boring!" said the plump little girl, who until six months before had been an emaciated waif. "It's a re-run of President Miller's speech."

The World Council president's corpulent, smirking face filled the screen. For an apocalyptic era, his teeth were excessively white and his clothes too pristine. Apparently life in the underground presidential bunker hadn't involved those hardships endured by surface survivors.

"The World Council has come to a historic agreement with the Conservators," he said.

The camera panned out, revealing the equally well-rounded figure of the vice-president. He was hobnobbing with a dozen of the benevolent aliens known as 'The Conservators'. These strange creatures seemed to be all translucence and tentacles, and Michael found it difficult to overcome his repugnance of mankind's saviours.

"Our intergalactic friends," the president continued, "have assured us that on Epsilon 5 we shall be staying in salubrious accommodation, surrounded by the flora and fauna of old Earth. All they ask of us is that we provide them with access to our global gene banks and to the stored genetic material of all Earth's extinct species. Before our departure an ark will transport this material to Epsilon 5, so by the time we arrive on our new planet, it will be a home away from home."

The President's smile broadened and Michael could almost read the man's thoughts. After years of privations following the collapse of Earth's natural life support systems, there would

once again be opportunities to farm animals for their meat, to hunt wildlife for the thrill of the adrenalin rush, and to wantonly slaughter them for their pelts, their tusks, and their skins.

"We're going to have fun on Epsilon 5," Michael told his daughter. "There'll be plenty of animals to hunt. I could even set up a trophy room in our new house."

"Won't the Conservators stop us from the same destruction we did here on Earth?" asked Kim. "I thought their mission was to set up conservations for extinct and endangered creatures? How will humans fit into their scheme if we continue doing on Epsilon 5 what we've done on Earth?"

Michael wasn't sure how to answer his daughter, for the agreement with the aliens had involved much consideration of mankind's inherent machinations. In fact, once the World Council had discovered that the Conservators were benign beings with a penchant for reconstituting extinct species from preserved DNA, impoverished humanity found that it had the upper hand in negotiations.

The president's position was simple. The aliens had to re-house the remnants of mankind on one of their conservancy planets, otherwise they would watch the DNA of Earth's extinct plants and animals destroyed one species at a time.

After the World Council had consigned ring-tailed lemurs and coelacanths to oblivion, the Conservators quickly caved to the council's demands. They pledged unequivocally to grant Earth's remaining human inhabitants an opulent place to stay on Epsilon 5. However, explaining this to a ten-year old girl would not be simple.

"Clarissa!" Michael called out to his tardy wife. "Ten minutes till we leave for the spaceport."

Clarissa Stephens stepped out of the bedroom dressed in designer clothes and teetering on high heels. Her hips swiveled as she made her way into the living room. Michael noticed the abundance of make-up on her face, and there hadn't been an occasion to wear make-up in a while.

"What do you think, honey?" Clarissa said, pouting.

Michael licked his lips. It was as if the years of hand-to-mouth existence had never happened; it was as if they were a young, frisky couple again. Then, remembering Kim, Michael put his urges on hold.

Clarissa had just noticed the re-run of the presidential address showing on the plasma-vision screen. "What are you watching that devious bugger's speech for?" she asked. "Where was he when we were choking on pollution and scavenging for scraps? And where is he now? He and his cronies were the first on the Conservator's ships to Epsilon 5. Once the aliens agreed to our staying in luxurious accommodations, they upped the stakes in a heartbeat. They've probably snaffled the best billets and left the dregs of the housing for us."

At that moment there came a knock on the door of the Stephens's apartment. An unbidden Conservator barged in, much to Michael and Clarissa's annoyance. "Your transportation to the spaceport is waiting," the alien said in a guttural monotone. He glided into the living room. "Your bags?"

"In the bedroom," Clarissa said looking down her nose at

the tentacled minion. Sneering, she followed her husband and daughter down the corridor, towards the last shuttle-bus headed for Heathrow Spaceport.

There were a few minor hiccups before departure. After finally putting aside his aversion for face-to-face conversations with the Conservators, Michael was told he'd be seated next to old man Barnard on the trip.

"Why is it a problem?" asked the check-in Conservator when Michael voiced his discontent.

Michael leaned in as close as he dared to the shimmering orb of the alien's head, and whispered: "He ate his own."

"But most human's resorted to some degree of cannibalism," the Conservator replied nonchalantly.

Clarissa took this last comment as a public rebuke and took over for her husband. "That's not the point. Old man Barnard ate his own wife."

Kim tugged at her mother's hand for attention. "But we swapped grandma for Mrs. Robinson's youngest son."

"That's different," Clarissa hissed. "Mrs Robinson's son wasn't our family. He wasn't our own."

A second problem occurred after the Conservator had assigned old man Barnard another seat. While searching Kim's bag, the Conservators discovered a jar of homemade blackberry jam. The Conservators had a strict policy that no fruits, vegetables, or meat could be taken off world.

"Please," the girl wailed. "It's all I have to remember grandma by."

"Preserves are prohibited," the Conservator maintained. "They're part of Earth's DNA bank, which is covered by our agreement with your president."

Clarissa was furious, and wasn't about to be placated by the alien's explanation. "For one thing, it's not a jar of 'preserves'! We're not bloody Americans, you know. It's a jar of jam, just a jar of blackberry jam, for God's sake. Her grandmother made it."

The Conservators were unbending on the subject of the jam, and after a high-pitched verbal exchange between the check-in alien and his supervisor, the preserves were confiscated and taken away.

Before their star-liner leaped into hyperspace, the Stephens's looked out the starboard window at the muddy grey ball that had once been the verdant, blue-oceaned orb of planet Earth. Less than thirty minutes later, they disembarked over Epsilon 5 and got on a hover-bus to their new home. Michael, Clarissa, and Kim stared out in wonder over a grassy savannah. It was like a centuries-old scene from Earth, an Earth they had only seen in archive pictures.

Herds of wildebeest migrated across the plains, dodging in and out of the paths of elephants and rhinos. Occasionally a wildebeest would fall to the claws of a pouncing lion, but otherwise the migration continued unabated.

"I'm going to enjoy this place," said Michael, his eyes almost popping from his head. "The hunting will be awesome."

Clarissa was equally enthusiastic. "Look!" she cried out,

pointing to an acacia tree. A leopard sat in the branches, waiting for any unwary prey to pass beneath. “That pelt would make for a wonderful fur coat.”Kim glanced from one parent to the other, digesting their words. She couldn’t understand why her mother and father would want to kill a creature or wear its skin.

Just then, the Conservator hover-bus driver spoke to them over the intercom. “This planet,” he said, “known to earthlings as Epsilon 5, houses your reconstituted wildlife. Due to its resemblance to a pre-industrialised Earth, it was chosen as the habitat for your previously extinct flora and fauna.”

Remembering the polluted mess of their own planet, Michael squeezed Clarissa’s hand, smiled, and kissed her lipstick-laden lips. Ahead of the hover-bus a salubrious, multi-floored building appeared. As promised, it looked like a palace.

“Your new home,” the hover-bus driver said. “This is where you’ll be staying.”

As the doors to the edifice opened, Michael and Clarissa frowned. The inside contained nothing but shelf upon shelf of bottled liquid. Some of the bottles, however, had creatures floating inside, humanoid creatures.

With a gasp, Michael recognised two of the humanoids as the World Council president and his vice-president. The wheeler-dealing duo’s smug grins had been wiped off their faces. Instead, their lips were forever frozen in circles of wide-open surprise.

“This is our genetics storehouse,” said the Conservator hover-bus driver. “As you’ve probably guessed from the storehouse’s contents, an offshoot of our conservation effort is

preservation. Due to mankind's incurably destructive nature, we'll be preserving you here for research purposes–in jars."

Lights, Camera, Action

by Jessy Marie Roberts

"I'm so excited to see this movie," Kaylee whispered in Greg's ear, her slim hand diving into the bucket of buttery popcorn. "I love horror flicks, and Matthew Matthewson is hot!"

"Here I thought you came to the movies with me because you think I'm hot," he joked, ignoring the first preview and watching his date instead. "And why are you whispering? We're the only two people in the theater!"

Her blue eyes scanned the empty room. "You are hot. You kind of remind me of Matthew Mattheson," she teased. "It's awesome that we have the theater to ourselves. You better be careful, Greg Hamer. I might just take advantage of you…if the movie sucks."

"'Halloween Massacre VII'? I think I'm guaranteed at least three kisses and a quick feel up your shirt."

She laughed, her tinkling merriment dancing off the black curtains of the theater. Greg pretended to yawn, sliding his arm around her slim shoulders and pulling her towards him. She giggled and snuggled against his chest.

"Now be quiet and behave yourself," she said, her jovial tone belying her stern words. "The movie is about to start."

Greg sighed, pulled his girlfriend closer, and dropped a quick kiss on the top of her head. Suspenseful music thrummed through the soundproof room as blood-spatter lettering spelled out 'Halloween Massacre VII: Rise of the Killer Pumpkin' across the white screen.

"Rise of the Killer Pumpkin?" he asked, barely containing his mirth.

"Shut up, Greg," she said and punched him lightly on the arm.

The door to the theater opened and the light from the hallway distorted the screen for a minute. "So much for having the place to ourselves," Greg whispered as someone walked down the lit aisle into the room.

"Oh, well. It was too good to last. I'll take advantage of you later," she promised, with her attention focused on the movie.

Greg watched as the person looked side to side, deciding on a seat. He tensed up when the individual slid into the row directly behind them and selected the second seat in.

He was sitting right behind them.

"What the hell?" Greg mumbled, sitting upright and jostling Kaylee. She flashed him an irritated expression, and then turned back to the movie screen. "Um, Kaylee, he's sitting right behind me!" he whispered furiously.

"Shhh," she answered. "Who cares?"

Greg glanced backwards. The stranger was most likely a kid–dressed in a long, black coat with a baseball cap pulled low, shadowing his features. He was five-two or five-three, skinny,

probably just a lonely, dateless teen trying to pass a Friday evening.

Greg relaxed his shoulders and slid his arm around Kaylee again. He fished into the bucket for a handful of popcorn and stuffed it into his mouth, dribbling a couple of puffed kernels down the front of his sweater.

Kaylee rolled her eyes. "Sexy, Greg. Dead sexy."

He grinned and watched a half-nude teen run across the screen screaming in terror, as a gigantic pumpkin sprouted legs and arms and then chased her with a butcher's knife.

"Aaarrrggh," the kid wheezed, grating on Greg's nerves.

"Did you hear that?"

"What?" she asked, munching on popcorn, distracted by the movie.

"The moaning sound," he answered, annoyed. "The kid is moaning."

"Aarrrrrgh," The noise was louder this time.

Kaylee tilted her head to the side, listening. "He probably has a cold or something. Leave him alone and watch the movie."

Greg crossed his arms over his chest and put the popcorn bucket on Kaylee's lap. Frowning, he concentrated on the movie.

Girl gets naked, pumpkin chases girl, pumpkin disembowels girl, carves her, lights a tea light candle in her hollowed-out belly, and puts her on random porches.

Greg smirked as he spied on Kaylee while she watched the movie–her eyes wide open, body jerking with each convoluted

plot twist.

A cool breeze whispered across the back of Greg's neck, triggering a shiver down his spine. "Kaylee," he whispered, leaning in toward his girlfriend.

She sighed and looked at him. "What, Greg? I can't watch the movie if you're going to keep talking to me!"

"But he's breathing on my neck! A completely empty movie theater–and he chooses to sit behind us? Why would you do that?"

"Who knows? Maybe he thought he'd get to see us making out or something. Trust me–there is no making out in your future if you don't let me watch the rest of this movie!"

"Fine," Greg snapped, ripping the popcorn bucket out of her hand and putting the rim against his bottom lip. He tilted the bucket and opened his mouth, chewing frantically.

"You're gross," she said, and then faced forward as the pumpkin shaved a girl's head off and carved a face into the back of her skull.

You're gross, he silently mimicked, swallowing his mouthful of popcorn and then gulping down some Cola.

Something cold and slimy tickled the back of his neck. Greg slapped his hand against the tingling skin.

"Stop that!" Kaylee said. "What is wrong with you?"

"Something touched me," he said through clenched teeth. "I think it was that kid."

"For the love of Pete, Greg–settle down and watch the movie, please."

"Tell him to settle down. First the groaning, then the

breathing, and now the touching? He's lucky I don't take him outside and kick his ass!"

"Get over it or I'm going to leave! This is the worst date I've

ever had!"

Greg tightened his lips, forcing himself to remain quiet. He watched the evil pumpkin scoop out a girl's innards, chop them up, and roast them in an oven.

Something sharp poked Greg at the base of his skull. He yelped, jumped to his feet, and turned to face the kid. "You better start running, you little shit," he warned, screaming at the top of his lungs.

Kaylee dropped the popcorn to the sticky floor and grabbed Greg's arm. "What on Earth is your problem?" she shrieked.

"He just stabbed me with something in the back of my neck! Look," he cried, dragging his fingertips across the base of his skull, showing his girlfriend the blood that dripped from them and splashed onto the lid of his fountain pop.

Kaylee gasped. "Are you okay?" she asked Greg, and then turned to the kid. "What did you do to him?"

The stranger sat still and eerily silent.

Kaylee leaned across the back of her seat and smacked the baseball cap off of his head. He had a pointed cranium, slimy green skin, and huge, cloudy eyes.

Her scream caught in her throat.

The creature stood–its long, piercing tongue darting out of its mouth.

"Jesus, Kaylee! It stabbed me with its tongue!" Greg

shouted, and then grabbed his girlfriend's hand and pulled her into the lit aisle. "Run!"

The couple sprinted out of the theater and into the lobby. The concessions stand clerk was slumped over the counter, a hole drilled into the back of her head, blood dribbling out of the opening to collect in a crimson pool of gore on the glass display case.

"Is she…is she…" Kaylee gasped, pointing at the clerk.

"Dead? Oh yeah, she's dead!"

The door to the movie theater opened and the monster walked into the lobby. He had dropped his coat and they could see his pea-green, scaly skin–shining and iridescent in the fluorescent light–with goo seeping out of the eight gills that lined its chest cavity.

"Make a run for the door," Greg said, pulling Kaylee behind him as he hurried to the exit. He pushed against the long handle, sputtering curses when it wouldn't budge.

"It's locked?" Kaylee asked with tears streaming down her face. "What's going on?"

The thing crept toward them in an unnatural, smooth gait. Out of the corner of his eye, Greg saw similar creatures walk out of the three other theaters to join the one that had attacked them.

The four met, stood in a line, and moved toward them in unison. Greg turned his back to the green monstrosities and pounded his fists against the glass door of the theater. He squinted and saw that a large, circular something had landed on a couple of the cars which lined Main Street–something that

looked like the top of the Seattle Space Needle.

"What do you want from us?" Kaylee screamed in a terror-infused voice.

Greg turned around and grasped her hand with his. "I know what they are," he said resigned. "And they're not from around here."

"Well?" she asked as the four things trapped them, their backs against the locked glass doors, in a semi-circle.

"Aliens," he whispered, squeezing her hand in his. "There's a crashed spaceship outside. They've landed."

With precise synchronicity the aliens opened their mouths, exposing glistening green gums–the sharp, protruding tongue slithering between them.

"But what do they want?"

"Brains."

Suddenly the tongues, like enchanted serpents, weaved behind the couple's heads and punctured their brain stems, sucking out the grey matter in slurping motions that left their skulls empty and their eyes glazed over.

The four aliens let the bodies fall to a heap on the floor, and then walked through the glass doors to snack on the rest of the world.

Heavenward

By Frank Roger

Like most days, many people had chosen to come early for their “final pilgrimage”. Samuel cast a glance at the queue and noticed, to his dismay, that a journalist and a cameraman were interviewing some of the candidates. His gut feeling was that it would be hard to convince them all to head home, even though they didn’t really have a choice. He hoped the television crew wouldn’t cause any trouble.

There was a volley of cheers once the pilgrims saw him, but their smiles quickly faded when he said: “I’m sorry guys, but we’re closed for the day because of unforeseen circumstances.”

“You must be joking,” an elderly man replied.

A red-haired, young woman–who might as well have been his daughter, judging from her features–added: “We have a pre-paid reservation for today, at eight o’clock. We desperately wanted to be the first. So please don’t tell us now that the whole thing is cancelled. We can’t go back. We have nothing to go back to.”

Samuel sighed, it would be difficult indeed. “As I’ve said, I’m terribly sorry but we’re forced to close down for reasons beyond our control. At this point I can’t tell you when you will be refunded–”

“We don’t want a refund,” the woman said insistently. “We paid to go to heaven, sold off all we had, and left the money to our loved ones. There’s just no going back, heaven is the only way to go now. We’re Believers, we’re heaven-bound.”

Samuel gathered his strength and braced himself. “I understand your situation, but unforeseen circumstances leave us no choice.”

“What are these circumstances?” a young man in the second row asked. The journalist and the cameraman were edging closer, keen to shoot some interesting footage.

I might as well tell them, Samuel decided. “The connection with the ship–the so-called beam–has been discontinued. It’s been down since last night. We’re not sure if it will come back on.”

Most of the pilgrims looked up at the sky, as if they could spot the spacecraft in its geosynchronous orbit around Earth from where they were. It was gigantic indeed, but was still invisible to the naked eye, and certainly in clear daylight.

The pilgrims were speechless and looked forlorn. After a few moments of awkward silence, the red-haired girl stammered: “Have the Gates of Heaven closed just before we wanted to pass through?”

“That appears to be the case indeed.”

“Maybe they will swing back open before long.”

“I cannot guarantee you anything. I suggest you all go back home and watch news updates.”

“We can’t go back. We’re Believers. We’ll wait here.”

“Yes, we’ll wait here,” several people repeated in unison.

Samuel didn't know what to say. He couldn't just order them away–after all they were paying customers. Nor did he want to have a full-scale riot on his hands by saying something disrespectful, especially with the television crew present.

He was in the process of coming up with a fitting piece of advice when his boss, Maurice, suddenly left the Heavenward office and ran up to him.

"Good morning everyone," he said, panting. "I just caught a special news flash on the radio. Apparently the spacecraft is leaving orbit. Now this of course explains why the beam was switched off. And unfortunately this also means–"

"–that Heaven is out of reach for us now," the red-haired girl whispered. When the implications of this latest turn of events dawned on the pilgrims, they gasped for breath and covered their faces with their hands. Some dropped to the ground, others started to pray.

"A message from the spacecraft was received," Maurice continued. "Linguists are now trying to decipher it. I suggest you all stay tuned for news updates. Please don't hang around here. It's pointless. Go back home, or go to your loved ones. Refunds will be dealt with later. We'll get back to you as soon as we can. Now please…"

Slowly the crowd dispersed, and Maurice and Samuel walked back to their office, relieved to have regained control of the situation.

"This is the end of our lucrative, little business," Maurice said grumpily. "We'll send no more pilgrims to Heaven."

"We're not sure we ever did," Samuel countered.

"No, but we made a lot of money–and those poor souls were convinced they went to Heaven. So everyone's happy."

The two men looked up from the knock on the door. The journalist and the cameraman entered. "Can we ask you a few questions?"

Samuel's boss hesitated for a moment. Maurice had ambivalent feelings towards the press and media people. He didn't like them hanging around, but had to admit, their coverage of his Heavenward Celestial Travel Agency was partly responsible for good business.

"Go ahead," Maurice finally said.

"Do you fear this is the end for Heavenward?"

"I'm afraid it is. We've reached the end of the line. You can follow our history over there."

He pointed at the collection of posters and pictures adorning the walls, which told the entire story in the style of a comic strip: The mysterious spacecraft was a perfect sphere, radiating a dazzling white light, appearing from the deepest reaches of the interstellar void and maneuvering in orbit around the Earth. Scientists hailed its arrival as the first sign of intelligent life beyond our own planet, but never grasped its true nature. Evangelists and religious leaders explained it as divine intervention, to show mankind the way ("too perfect and beautiful to be the product of mere mortal creatures like man or his alien counterpart"). A world-renowned linguist held up a piece of cardboard inscribed with the words JOIN ME IN HEAVEN–claiming it was the meaning of the continual transmission from the craft. A picture of the beam–directed at

regular intervals from the craft down to Earth's surface–at the very spot they occupied.

"Do you still remember how it all began?" the journalist asked.

"It began right here, barely a month ago," Maurice replied. "Many people came to gaze at this curious beam winking on and off every fifteen minutes, and then one day this guy inadvertently stepped through the beam, and found himself transported to the spacecraft in orbit. We never saw him back."

"Scientists found that the beam was a transmission system which somehow sent people up there–but they failed to come up with an explanation."

"Yeah, but soon people started to believe the evangelists who claimed this was the way to Heaven, that God had sent this ship to save His chosen ones, so they could flee the Apocalypse on Earth. 'Join me in Heaven' was taken as a direct message from God, an invitation that could not be turned down. The evangelists cleaned out many of the peoples' savings funds–business as usual for them."

Samuel added his two cents worth: "Pilgrims–the so-called Believers–started coming in droves, jostling and almost trampling each other, hoping to be caught in the beam as it materialized. There was a horrible accident–remember?–when a guy was cut in two by the beam, and only half of his body was transported."

"Yeah, that was the moment I decided to move in," Maurice said. "Someone had to organize this thing, so I thought, why not me? That was how my Heavenward agency

was born. We worked out a booking system, took care of the practical side, and made sure everything happened safely."

"It's a fact that there were no more accidents," the journalist said, "but many people felt you were exploiting naïve people's religious yearnings."

"No, we didn't. We gave those poor souls what they wanted for a reasonable price. Our system worked and we made lots of money. Too bad it seems to be over now. The beam's gone, and the craft is leaving orbit. Heavenward is out of business."

"Will we ever know the true nature of the creatures aboard that spacecraft? Where do they come from, what do they look like, why were they unable or unwilling to establish genuine contact? Are our differences unbridgeable? Is their thought process unfathomable to us? Will we ever find out?"

"I have no idea; I guess this matter is best left to the scientists. Maybe the linguists will decipher the final message. That might yield something."

"And where does this leave you?"

Maurice shrugged and tapped Samuel on the shoulder. "I suppose we'll have to look for new jobs. There will be no more pilgrims, no more customers paying good money for their final journey. The Believers have lost faith–and the evangelists a source of income."

"Is there anything you'd like to close this interview with?"

Maurice thought for a moment, and then nodded. "Yeah. Sometimes I wonder what happened to all those people that were beamed aboard that spacecraft. I guess we'll never know. I

just hope they're happy, and got their money's worth."

"Thank you for the interview, gentlemen."

Halfway through eating breakfast, Samuel's phone rang. He picked it up and heard a well-known voice say: "Sam? This is Maurice. Did you catch that news flash? The update on the spacecraft?"

"No, I'm still having breakfast."

"Well, finish your breakfast and get out of there. We won't have to look for new jobs, but rather, for a safe place to hide."

"What are you talking about, Maurice?"

"Linguists finally deciphered the spacecraft's final message. They say it means: ENOUGH NUTRIENTS COLLECTED TO CONTINUE JOURNEY. Do you get it, Sam?"

"I guess I do. It's all becoming clear. Those people didn't really go to Heaven after all–the evangelists were wrong. We didn't ship pilgrims–we delivered food."

"Some people won't be happy, Sam. We came in for a lot of flak before, but I suppose the worst is yet to come…"

The Ancient Monsters

By Kristen Lee Knapp

There are five. Five potential shells. Four call themselves humans. Ape-men from a blue world. They are most suitable.

Smoke, shouts, screams, and the wail of an electric guitar thundered over the battlefield. Fleurs-de-lis and the red cross of St. George rippled in the wind.

Jerra climbed over the castle wall and shoved her sword into the bowels of a waiting archer. He screamed, dropped his bow, and fell back dead. She vaulted over the battlements and hacked into her foes. Gobs of blood splashed her face.

"Really," a voice said.

She looked around. A squat bald alien stood beside her. His face was stout and rumpled like a pug's. Two tufts of hair on the either side of his head made him look clownish.

"This program of yours is quite insane."

Jerra sighed. "End," she said.

The castle, smoke, and battle vanished. She pulled the pods from her temples. "What do you want Dex?"

He wrung his thumbs in his belt. "You've been in here for forty six hours you know," he said. The tentacles hanging from his mouth wriggled when he spoke.

She leapt, caught a pipe, and started doing pull-ups. "So?"

Dex ogled her. "Doesn't it bother you, being alone in

here?"

"No."

"Well, the Captain wants you down for a psyche analysis and a physical."

She switched to one arm. "Okay."

Dex walked over to the wall and touched the panel. The screen vanished. The stars glittered outside on the sprawling, black backdrop of space. "People go insane on these long runs. Happens all the time."

"Yep," she said, glancing at him.

He stared at her legs.

"You handle it like a pro," he said. "Is this really only your first run."

She dropped and toweled off her face. "Goodbye, Dex."

"What's your secret? I mean, this is my third run. Some of the guys have been on ten or more, and they're going stir crazy."

She walked him out. "Goodbye."

"I'm not asking all that much. Just dinner, maybe a movie, as friends. No reason we can't be friends."

"Goodbye, Dex." She pressed the button and the door blinked shut. She leaned against it, watching outside as the stars floated past. She shut the window, yanked off her sweat-stained clothes, and took a shower. She changed into a grey jumpsuit and left her quarters for the mess hall.

Two faces turned and stared at her. One was a black man with short-cropped hair. His face was strong and attractive, framing his dark, serrated eyes. The other was a white man–

maybe of English origins–with a face pocked by innumerable freckles. His green eyes went with his dimply smile. Dry purple splotches marred his cheeks and neck, remnants of the plague lingering somewhere in his gene pool.

"What's cooking, Cula?" she asked.

"Souflet-a-replicator," said the black man, spooning up some grey mashed potatoes and flinging them back on his plate.

"Where you been?" asked Gert.

"In my quarters."

"Dex said you were using your pods again.?" His eyes gleamed like emeralds.

She nodded, walked over to the replicator. It whirred and a tray of food appeared in a cloud of grey steam.

"Maybe you could tell us what kind of program you're running in there," he said.

Cula nudged him and shook his head.

"What?" asked Gert. "We're all friends–all stuck on the same can together. What's wrong with talking?"

"Shut up already," said Cula.

She sat and scarfed down her food.

Gert came over and sat beside her. "So what was it? Tell me."

"A custom simulation," she said, looking at him.

"Yeah? Maybe you could show me?"

The specter of a smile haunted her lips as she thought of shoving a sword into his guts. "Maybe."

He took it wrong. He smiled back. "I've got a few custom simulations of my own. Maybe I could show you sometime."

“Maybe,” she said. “Where’s the captain?”

Cula shrugged. “With the doc, last I saw. Said they wanted to see you.”

“They can wait,” said Gert.

“Man, just leave her alone. She’s not interested.”

“No one was talking to you.”

She stood and left, going down a hatch and into the medical center.Captain Greene stood with the freighter’s doctor, Vin. They looked at her and fell silent.

“Wanted to see me?” asked Jerra.

“Yes,” said the Captain. He was an older man with a long face, and frost in his thin black hair. His eyes were small, dull, like two clay marbles. “I’d like you to take a physical and a psyche evaluation.”

“Why?”

“No one needs a reason to be aware of their health,” said Vin. His iron colored hair looked plaster-cast in gel. His eyes were too large for his face, making him look like a fish.

“I’m the Captain,” said Greene. “You have to obey me. My orders stand. I can’t afford any crew members being less than one hundred percent.”

“So the others are coming in for a physical too?” she said.

Greene’s face went red. “Are you questioning my–”

“Captain,” said Vin. “I’ll take care of it. Go ahead.”

Greene stomped off.

Vin chortled and walked over to a table. “No accounting for ex-military. Probably misses his glory days.”

“Why do I need evaluations?” she said.

"You don't." He looked at her. "Usually these runs have a crew of twenty. Men and women. And the Corp encourages fraternization, social and sexual."

"Is that the only reason I'm here?"

"It's probably a big part of it. You've got high marks as a pilot. But pilots are a dime a dozen. Dying off too, once they work the kinks out of AI pilots."

"So what's your point?"

"Calling you out of your quarters is more for the crew than for you."

"I won't spread my legs for them."

He nodded. "That's what the pods are for. No one's asking you to do anything but pretend to need a little interaction. It'll probably make the rest of the journey easier."

Red light flooded the room and alarms wailed.

"Sit rep," said Greene, running onto the bridge.

Cula tapped his screen. "Unidentified object blocking the shipping lane. Another ship, maybe."

"No." Gert shook his head. "Too big. Composition reading is in. Rock, ice, dust, iron–asteroid maybe, debris from a planetoid collision."

"Visual," said Cula.

The cockpit wall melted, becoming translucent. A massive structure floated through space. Its rocky, grey shape defied any concept of congruity or practicality. Its surface was covered with spike-like spires and perfectly circular domes, growing on the structure like immense buboes.

"Get us closer," said Greene.

Jerra maneuvered the ship closer, wrestling with the twin joysticks and fluttering the pedals. The Hidalgo was one of the smallest ships she'd ever piloted, and also the clumsiest. The control was sluggish, bordering on unresponsive.

"How big is it?" asked Gert.

Dex looked up from his tech console. "Object is. . . two hundred kilometers long, seventy kilometers wide." He whistled.

"So what is it?" said Gert. "An alien ship?"

Everyone looked at Dex. "Don't look at me. I've no idea."

"It can't be a ship," said Cula. "There's no propulsion. No engines. No life support. No electricity, nothing. Maybe it's some kind of temple. Like the pyramids of Earth.," said Cula.

"We must tow it," Greene said suddenly.

"I. . . uh." Dex scratched his head. "Maybe we can. There's no precedent for towing anything that big. I'm not a scientist, I just work here."

Jerra felt light-headed and dizzy. She cradled her head in her hands.

"Do any of you know how much the Corp pays for derelict alien technology and artifacts? If we bring that thing back we'll be rich!" Gert laughed.

"Yeah…" said Cula, eyes lighting up. "We'll be rich."

"We don't even know if we can tow it," said Vin. "Let alone what it is. It could be dangerous."

"Let the Corp worry about that," said Gert.

Jerra gasped and held her temples. No one noticed, everyone

was staring out at the continent of ludicrously shaped rock, floating through space.

"We'll uh. . . Need need to reduce speed," said Dex. "To be on the safe side. I don't want to push this heap too hard."

"We will not," said Greene.

"Hey, I'll spend a few more days in the can if it gets me back home alive and rich," said Gert, grinning.

"Same here," said Cula.

"Irrelevant," said Greene. His face was still, his eyes dead focused on the structure.

"Well, let's see if we can even get the tow working. The Hidalgo has one but I've never tried it."

"We must take the vessel with us." Greene stood and walked from the bridge in silence.

"What was that about?" asked Vin.

Blood poured from out of Jerra's nose and flowed down her face.

"Jerra!" shouted Dex.

She blacked out.

She sat up and screamed. Vin held her shoulders. "Relax!" he shouted. "Breathe. You're okay."

The dull throb of pain in her temples subsided. Her vision cleared. "What happened?"

"You passed out," he said, checking her pulse. "Bleeding from the nose. Some sort of episode. Maybe triggered by stress, I don't know." He paused. "You were out for almost thirty-six hours."

She moaned and held her head.

"Here. Drink this." He gave her a squat glass filled with an amber fluid.

She drank and coughed. "Whiskey?"

He nodded. "Glenlivits," he said. He forced one of her eyes open and looked in with a tiny light. "Could have been triggered by your pod use. Lay off that for a few days."

She remembered. "What happened? Where's the thing?"

Vin pointed. "About a kilometer that way. The crew's ecstatic. Tramping around the ship, smoking replicator cigars, drinking champagne. I heard Dex whistling 'We're in the money'. Personally, the thing creeps me out."

She stood and shook her head. "Where's Greene?"

Vin shrugged. "In his quarters. Been there since, and hasn't come out. He must be weirded out." He poured her another drink. "Get some food, you're probably starving. I'll check on you in a bit."

She took the drink and went to the mess hall. Clouds of cigar smoke billowed through the room. Dex, Gert, and Cula sat around, smoking and drinking.

"Feeling better?" said Dex, exhaling a ring of smoke between two tentacles.

"Is it true about Greene?" she said.

Gert shrugged. "Hasn't come out of his quarters."

"Never liked him anyway," said Cula.

"We have to get rid of it," Jerra blurted. "The alien ship."

They stopped and stared at her. "What are you saying?" asked Dex.

“Just fucking listen to me. We have to cut it loose. Now.”

“What is that, woman’s intuition?” Gert grinned, belched.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” said Dex, concern in his alien eyes.

“Are you morons fucking deaf or just stupid? We have to cut it loose.” Lava bubbled in her throat.

“Confine her to her quarters,” said Greene. He stood in a corridor, staring.

Cula looked between them. “Wait, what?”

“I’m ordering you to confine her to her quarters.”

A moment of hesitation.

“Do it.”

They put down their cigars and champagne, and walked Jerra through the ship to her quarters.

Dex stopped a moment before leaving her. “Greene’s just. . . I don’t know. You’ll be fine,” he said, shutting the door. Someone locked it.

She lay on her bed. Her temples pulsed, throbbed, sending shockwaves of pain roiling through her body, into her arms, and down her legs. Jerra took deep breaths and tried to clear her mind.

He will try soon.

She knew it, as simply as she knew up and down, left and right. She became acutely aware of her surroundings, of the rhythmless song of beeping machinery and cooing monitors against the white noise of the ship’s engines.

Her muscles tensed, her breath ceased. All at once, she

knew his eye was on her. She saw him huddled in his chair, staring at her on a dim computer monitor, watching her every motion.

Something wriggled through the air grate and plopped down on the floor. A black, sluglike creature bubbled, reared up, and flew at her face. She ducked, rolled across the floor. She ripped open the control panel and yanked the emergency release. The iron door lunged open and she leapt through. Something beat against the other side, a horrendous sucking sound.

She panted, gathered herself back up. Security orbs on the ceiling watched her from the ceiling, following her movements.

She stumbled into the mess hall. Dex was snoring, his mandibles gaping and green drool dribbling down his neck. Cula and Gert were playing cards, slapping down chips, trading grins and curses. Vin was drinking.

"It's in my room," she said.

They looked at her. "Say what?" asked Gert, pulling the cigar from his teeth.

"It's Greene," she said. "He wants to kill me. He's trying right now."

"Come on, why would he want to kill you?" asked Cula.

"He knows I know." She put her hand on her forehead. Why was it so fucking hard to explain?

Vin stood. "Look. We're all on your side. Ridiculous of him to throw you in your room like that. You just had a nightmare. Come on." He flicked his bottle. "I bet I can drink you under the table."

She sat with them. She watched Cula win a couple hundred dollars, watched Gert sweat like a pig as he tried to win it back. Vin became increasingly incoherent as he continued to drink. Dex made horrible noises in his sleep. Hours slipped by. She leaned against the sofa and closed her eyes.

Stop, a voice said.

She opened her eyes and saw only darkness.

Stop, it said again.

"Stop what? What's happening to me?"

Stop. Stop.

Vin shook her awake. "Heyyy. You keep saying stop, stop, stop. You dreaming of having sex with Gert?"

Cula exploded with laughter.

"Hey… hey shut up," said Gert, face reddening.

Vin and Cula laughed some more. The noise seemed far away to Jerra. She could only feel Greene's eyes, pouring over her like tar.

The ship lurched. Jerra rolled off the couch and smashed onto the floor. Sirens sang and the alarms screamed red.

A sound like tearing, ripping. Something was savaging the hull.

"What the hell's going on?" Cula shouted.

Dex ran to a console and pressed a few buttons. "Captain! Greene! What's happening?"

Silence.

Jerra stood and ran. The others followed in a mad stampede for the ship's bridge.

Greene sat alone on the deck, staring out at the huge stone structure.

"Hey Captain, what's going on?" Dex asked as he walked over. He nudged his shoulder. "You drunk? Wake up."

Cula sat at his controls. "We're stopped. The engines are dead, gravity lines are down, there's a leak in the hull."

"What about the thing?" Gert cried, leaping into his chair.

Cula shook his head. "It's stopped too."

"How bad are the engines?" asked Vin.

Cula shook his head. "I'm sending the robots to assess the damage."

"What can cause the engines to stop like that?"

"Stripped plugs, maybe some burned or burnt–out converters. Then again, they might just be completely shot."

"Feeble," said Greene.

"The thing did this to us." Jerra pointed. "That thing did this to us."

"We don't know that," Cula muttered.

"Just leave the fucking thing here!"

"We leave the thing here, someone else is going to find it." Gert itched at one of the purple splotches on his neck. "I don't know about you guys, but I want that money."

"I'm with Gert," Cula said, shrugging. "Why throw away all that money?"

Jerra's veins throbbed. Her eyes were drawn to the thing and when she tried to look away they snapped back like rubber bands. "Then I'm going in there."

"Why are we doing this again?" Dex yanked on his too-small spacesuit.

Jerra latched her helmet to her suit. "Something's going on there, and I'm going to find out what."

"Not like it matters." Gert worked his fingers into his gloves. "It'll be hours before Cula can fix the engines. Besides, we might find something." His eyes flared. "Maybe it's like a pharaoh's tomb. King Tut, you know."

"Tut's tomb was cursed," said Dex.

Gert laughed. "My ass."

They opened the hatch and stepped into the airlock. An alarm sounded as the door shut. The airlock depressurized and the hatch spun open. The stone structure hovered ahead, stars glittering beyond its huge surface.

"Extending the bridge, just a sec," said Vin's voice over the comms.

A bridge of light extended from the airlock, out into space. They started walking.

"There's the door," said Gert, pointing and grinning at a shadowy entry. "King Tut awaits."

They jumped off the bridge and onto the structure. Their boots glowed, sucking them to the surface.

"Feel how smooth it is," said Dex, kneeling down. "Like glass."

Gert grunted and walked on towards the entrance.

"What makes something like this?" Jerra asked.

Dex shrugged his tentacles. "Dunno."

They followed Gert and came to the entrance, flipping on

their helmet lights. The ceiling loomed above, too distant for their lights to touch. Strange circles lined every surface in uniform rows, each marked with strange dots, spirals, and an infinite number of symbols.

"What the hell are they?" Jerra asked.

"Look at them," Dex said. "No two are the same. Maybe they're a history, a story. Like hieroglyphics or something."

Gert walked ahead, leaving them behind.

"Hey! We need to stay together," Dex shouted.

"This place is like a maze," Gert muttered, wandering away.

Dex sighed and looked at Jerra. "Let's go after him. We can't just let. . ."

Jerra's heart thumped in her chest. She could feel every pulse in her wrists, neck and face.

Dex shook her by the shoulders. "You okay?"

"Fine," she said.

"I'm going after him. I'll be back, understand?"

She clenched her jaw. Dex turned and walked away, following Gert.

Ahead.

The word materialized in her mind.

Her legs seemed to pull her forward of their own accord, carrying her down countless twists and corridors. The walls narrowed and she stepped into a small cylindrical antechamber.

Blue ghost-light flared all around her, growing, filling her, swallowing her. A tingle crept into her toes and fingers, spreading into her legs and chest. Her hands disintegrated into swirls of floating molecules. Her arms and legs vanished, then

her chest and head.

She woke, floating weightlessly in a spherical chamber. Massive stone balls lined the walls in perfect rows, each glowing with ghastly light.

Warmth spread through her chest, filling her. Something was there, a shimmering. Pressure crushed her skull until she felt liable to explode. “What are you?” Jerra screamed. “What do you want?”

I am sorry, a voice said.

Tears formed in her eyes, her heart became lead. Blood poured from her nose, down into her mouth. Indescribable pain tremored through her body.

The presence drew back, the pain subsided.

Light bloomed within one of the stone spheres. It changed, bubbling into a translucent fluid. Something moved inside and a humanoid shape crawled free, floated towards her.

Its skin was tough like an elephant’s hide. The face was hideous, with massive hanging jowls and bulging bones pressing against the ashen flesh. Two black eyes stared, devoid of any light.

“I am alone,” it said. Its words were garbled, as though spoken with a mouthful of water.

“What are you?” she asked. “Is this what you look like?”

“No,” it said. “This shell is dead. All of these shells are dead. I must use it or I will bring you pain.”

“What is this place? What are these things?”

“A vessel. These are tombs,” it said, pointing at the

spheres. “Tombs for past shells. I have lived with them. Within them. In harmony.”

“Like a parasite?”

“Symbiosis,” it said.

Felt like ants were crawling all over her. “What did you do to Greene?”

“Nothing,” it said. “The Devourer took your Greene. Only I can combat it.” The thing paused. “If you only let me join with you, I can fight him.”

She withdrew in horror. “No.”

“The Devourer will take you, as it has taken your comrades.”

Ice trickled through her veins. “What are you saying?”

“It has eaten your crew.”

Her face flushed, she wanted nothing more than to press her hands to her cheeks. “I don’t understand. I have to go back to the ship, I can get away.”

“The Devourer is there.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying!”

“It is a demon. An evil relative. It does not coexist. It consumes. And what it consumes, consumes. It has existed since before, living a miserable existence in horrid hunger. It started eating.”

“Only I can fight it,” the thing said. “You must submit to me.”

“No,” she screamed. “No, you can’t! I’m getting the fuck out of here.”

“No,” it said. “You cannot return to your Earth.”

"Why?"

"It has searched your minds. It knows there are billions there. It will consume them too."

"Let me out!" She screamed, her own shriek drilling into her ears. "*Let me out!*"

The creature made a noise like a sigh. "Journey well," it said.

Blue light engulfed her.

She woke awoke in the sphere room. She stood and cast the lights of her helmet around. Empty.

"Jerra," Dex's voice came over the comms.

She felt her throat clench and her heart thumped in her chest. "Dex," she said. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Jerra took a breath. All some nightmare. "Nothing. Did you find Gert?"

"Yeah. Where are you?" A pause. "Where are you?"

"In front of the cylinder room. Did you find King Tut's treasure?"

Silence. Darkness. She imagined she heard the sound of footsteps plodding closer.

She turned. Gert and Dex stood in their space suits.

"Jesus," she said. "Where the hell have you been?"

She glanced over her shoulder. Cula, Greene, and Vin were coming closer. They wore no space suits, no helmets. Frozen skin, frozen eyes.

Her legs trembled as she retreated back.

Her space-suit lights flickered, died, and the darkness swallowed her.

Something clenched around her shoulder. She ejected the laser- saw from her wrist control and thrashed. Severed arms and legs floated past. The heads sailed around, black eyes following her, unblinking.

Dex's claw clenched around her wrist. Another grabbed her ankle. She pushed off and sprang away. Her foot sank into a pool of black fluid. It frothed up, wrangled her to the ground. She shrieked and fought.

The black fluid stopped and receded. A mercurial puddle snaked its way down the wall and collided with the dark. The tar creature scattered into countless particles.

The grey puddle shivered and dimmed. Ripples trickled through its smooth surface.

We must join, the voice said.

"No!" she shouted. "I said no already!"

You will die if you do not, it said, approaching.

Jerra ran away, the presence followed. She lost herself in the labyrinth of stone, ring-lined walls.

She stopped. Light flared from a wall and the barrier slid open. A cacophony of chaotic lights and colors waited beyond. All ranges of color appeared–dazzling blues, flaming orange, yellow, red, blinding white, and lush greens.

She stared. "What is it?" she asked.

The Forever Door, the voice said. The silver fluid came up beside her.

She recoiled. "Stay the fuck away."

I cannot join you if you are unwilling, it said, sounding tired.

Her muscles relaxed. “Where does this door lead?”

The Door may lead anywhere.

The shadows shifted and boiled closer.

There is no time, the voice said. It will continue to eat, and eat, and eat.

“I don’t believe you,” she screamed. “I don’t care. Do you understand me? I won’t let you live inside me.”

The darkness sprang forward and wrapped around the silvery fluid. The impact shook the walls and the whole structure shuddered.

She stepped through into the lights. The doorway, the alien ship, the creatures–everything fell far away. Her body stretched, her arms felt miles away, her eyes saw behind and forward, her mind seemed to float through the top of her skull.

A sound like a collision–like a meteor plummeting to the earth. Her vision fizzled back, shades of dusky grey, blooming greens appearing before her.

A world materialized, where colossal trees loomed like skyscrapers, reaching up into the blue and white swirled sky. Crater- marred moons hovered above, some distant and far, no fewer than three dozen, each curved like half-opened eyes.

Jerra pressed a button on her suit. Numbers flashed across her visor:

78.08 N__ 20.95 O2__ 0.93 Ar__ 0.038 CO2.

She flipped the latches on her helmet and pulled it off. It was the first time she’d ever smelled sweet air. The scents of

sun–cooked grass and something like cloying tree–sap filled her nose. Birds took flight from shadowed trees. She walked into the forest.

The Stranger

By David Bernstein

Karen Lakemire was on her way to work and needed cash. She had gone out the night before and spent her entire paycheck at Donna's Male Review. It was her best friend's bachelorette party and she not only paid for herself, but her friend as well. Heading down Tillbury Street–a route she knew well–Karen pulled her Mercedes over to a metered parking spot. She grabbed her purse and left the car, pushing the button on her remote key chain. Hearing the chirping sound assured her that the car was secure while she walked to the bank.

At the door she slid the ATM card into the card reader. The red light was quickly replaced by a green one. As she pulled the door open and stepped inside, someone from behind slammed into her, knocking her to the floor.

"Get up. Get the fuck up," a man's voice said.

Karen turned around and saw what looked like a huge homeless man standing a few feet from her. The clothes he wore were ragged, with all sorts of stains. He had on a dirty wool hat, but no hair showed from beneath it. A noxious odor was thrown forward with the momentum of his large body. The smell–a mixture of awful body odor and garbage–made her want to vomit. His skin was clean and his face was recently

shaven.

"Are you deaf? I said get the fuck up." The man's eyes were intense, like a wild animal's.

Karen slowly got up. She felt pain in her right knee, looked down, and noticed she was bleeding where it had bashed it on the floor. "What do you want, money?" she asked.

The man pursed his lips together, cheekbones bulging as he ground his teeth. "I want you to do exactly what I say. You got it lady?"

Karen nodded her understanding. She held out her ATM card. "Here, just take it. The pin is 4-3-5-5." She had seen enough news stories and didn't really care if the guy took her ATM card. The most he could get was five hundred dollars, not an amount worth worrying about.

"Is that your car out there?" he asked

Karen glanced at her Mercedes wondering if the guy had seen her drive up in it. "No," she answered.

The man walked over to her. Karen started to tremble, recoiling in fear. The man's arm shot forward, grabbed Karen by the throat, and pinned her against the wall.

"I'm not playing around here honey, so stop the lying." He released his hold and stepped back.

"Let's start again. If you do what I say–and don't lie to me–and maybe, just maybe, I won't plunge this knife into your skull," he said producing a large steak knife from his jacket.

He slid it under her chin, caressing the nape of her neck with its pointed tip. Karen cringed and without realizing it, raised herself onto her toes to get as far away from the blade as

possible. The man hid the knife back in his filthy coat.

Tears began to fill her eyes–the situation overwhelming.

"Stop the crying, I hate that shit," the man said.

Karen held it in as best she could, she only whimpered a little.

"This machine is out of order, so we're gonna' take a little ride in your car, okay?"

That was a no-no and Karen knew it. He could have the money, but getting in her car with this guy could lead to bad things–very nasty things. She turned around and saw the "Out Of Order" sign taped to the machine.

"Please, don't do this," she pleaded. Karen's head flew back as the man pulled her hair, yanking her across the room. She was in good shape and worked out regularly at the gym, but found it difficult to stay on her feet. Luckily she had on shoes with no heels and was able to keep her balance.

Still grasping her hair, he whispered into her ear. "I'll kill you. Right here, right now. Your pretty little face doesn't mean shit to me. I'll just move on to the next one. So pick up the fucking card and get in your car."

Karen was frightened, but could feel a seed of anger growing in her belly. She told herself if he didn't have the knife she'd punch, kick, scream, and rip his heart out–or at least try. She could leave this scumbag with some war wounds he would never forget, but she was scared, terrified. Beyond that, there was something wrong about him. He looked like a homeless guy off the street, but his face, skin, and breath were clean, unlike someone who'd been living off of trash and unable to wash with soap. He was acting

like a homeless man–but why?

"Okay," Karen said explosively, bending down and picking up the card. She thought about the walk to the car as she dropped the card in her pocket. It was Monday, ten minutes after seven in the morning. Leaving the bank with this guy, dressed the way she was–in her gray suit and long legs jetting out from her skirt–might be enough to attract the help she needed. The bleeding knee only added to her plea.

He made her hand over the car keys. "I'll unlock your doors on the way to the car, but you're drivin', and don't try to run or yell for help." Then he added, "I won't give you another warning."

She believed he would cut her down the minute she made a sound or broke for freedom. They left the bank, Karen in the lead with the man behind her. The lights flashed twice on her car, indicating that the alarm was off and all four doors were open. She glanced left and right without moving her head, looking for someone she could make eye contact with, but there was no one nearby. The only people she saw were waiting for the bus at the end of the block.

Karen walked around the front of her car while the huge man waited at the passenger's door. She got in and sat down. The man stood outside with his door ajar, keeping her from locking him out.

Karen thought to herself–this guy was no street inhabitant. He was too clear-headed, and acting like he'd done this before.

The man got in and shut the door. He pushed the lock button and all four doors clicked simultaneously. With the

windows up, the smell was awful. She could care less about the car or if she would be able to get the smell out. She worried if she could take the odor. She gagged and wanted to puke, but stopped herself, fearing the guy would off her and move to an easier target.

"Drive," he commanded. "Put your belt on, we don't need any unfortunate stops." She always wore her seatbelt and would have put it on regardless, but hoped he wouldn't. To her dismay, the man strapped himself in, killing any ideas she might have had on launching him into the windshield with a crash.

"Where to?" she asked.

"Just drive. I'll tell you where to go when you need to know," he stated.

He grabbed her purse as she pulled away from the curb, rummaged through it and pulled out her cell phone. After playing with the buttons, he then tossed it in the back seat. Next he yanked out her wallet and tore the license from it. "Karen, Karen Lakemire. Pretty name, Karen. Are we married, Karen Lakemire of 214 Clearview Drive?"

She was glad she hadn't gotten around to changing her license yet. She had moved from the address on her license four months ago, but her job at Gimble, Mercowitz, and Steiner had kept her from making a trip to the Department of Motor Vehicles. There was no way for him to find out where she lived now and that was enough to make her feel a little better. "Well?" he asked.

"No," she answered.

"Sounds like a married name, too bad you'll have to lose it. Unless you're one of those bitches who want to keep her name

or hyphenate it," he said, sounding smug.

Not knowing if it was a real question or just him babbling, she decided not to answer. Karen came to a red traffic light and stopped the car.

"How's a woman like you not married yet? Wait let me guess." He paused as the light turned green. "Career," he continued. "Too busy to settle down. I can't blame you Karen. Turn left at the next light. There's an ATM at the end of the block. Stop when you get there."

She made the left, drove down the street, and parked in front of Mark's Deli. It was the only store open on the block. The words "ATM Inside" were written in black marker on a piece of white cardboard that hung in the store's window. The street was void of any activity. Graffiti laced the building's exterior. The sidewalks were all cracked and broken with pieces of concrete, jutting out like spears.

Karen sat listening to the car idle and waiting for the man to get out, but he hadn't moved since she pulled over. He said nothing, only stared out the window. She wondered why he was just sitting there. He'd already fished through her purse, taking all her cash and credit cards, even her gift card from Borders.

"Give me your keys," the man said. "I'm going to jump out for a second, but don't worry, I won't be leaving you for long." She handed him the keys and he got out.

Karen watched him walk across the street and lean against a parking sign. Five minutes passed with no change in the man's position. Karen wanted to sprint out of the car, but was too afraid that with the street being deserted, she wouldn't make

it far enough before the big guy could run her down. The way he moved in the bank was another indication that this guy wasn't malnourished.

Karen felt a warm spot of optimism grow in her stomach. The ATM at the bank must have had a camera. The whole episode had to have been caught on tape, unless the "Out Of Order" sign applied to the camera as well. It was something, and that was a little more reason to keep it together. She was going to use everything and anything as fuel for her mind. She needed to keep her wits so she could stop this guy. She never had a mission before, and that's exactly how she had to look at her situation.

Karen noticed a man dressed in a gray suit. He was walking toward her, but on the opposite side of the street, the same side as her frightening keeper. She wanted to break the window and yell for help, but before she got a chance the man was attacked.

The homeless man sprang to life as the business man walked by him. Karen's captor reached out and grabbed the man's face, pushing him down, slamming his head into one of the pointed pieces of cement. The back of the man's head caved in like it was a warm cherry pie. Blood splattered as the business man's body flailed wildly. The homeless man sat on his legs and started unbuttoning the downed man's shirt.

Karen watched in disbelief and horror. It wasn't real, she wasn't here. She lay elsewhere, in her bed, cozy and sleeping– while her mind endured this terrible nightmare. She turned away not wanting to watch, pleading to wake up, but she wasn't dreaming. She turned back and saw the son-of-a-bitch flip the

man over like he was weightless. He was strong–really strong. He had the dead man's jacket off in seconds, tossing it aside along with the corpse's tie.

The white button-down shirt was next. Once he had it off, the burly man took off his own raggedy coat, revealing a well muscled monster with tattoos running up and down his arms. She couldn't see his back, but guessed it was covered as well. He put the white, button-down shirt the guy had been wearing on. It was snug–outlining the man's tightly honed body. He buttoned it, covering his chiseled six-pack. The muscle man went back to work and removed the pants, socks, and shoes. He took his time, seeming not to care if cars were driving by, or if anyone was watching.

Fully dressed in new clothes–except for the tie–the man walked back across the street, walked in front of the car, and held his index finger in front of his lips, indicating Karen to be quiet. He was still wearing the cap and she guessed he must have forgotten it was on his head. She noticed a blood stain on the collar of his jacket as he passed by.

She sat there staring at the dead man dressed only in his underwear. Blood pooled around the body and dripped over the curb. She started to cry, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Hold yourself together, girl. Don't let this fuck see you like this," she told herself aloud.

Hearing her voice was frightening. It echoed through her mind. She'd never been so commanding and strong before. Once the tears stopped, she looked at her reflection in the rearview mirror and wiped her cheeks.

The man went inside the store, leaving Karen in the car alone. He must have known she wouldn't run–couldn't run. Glancing at her purse, Karen remembered her cell phone, but the guy had tossed it in the back seat. She reached back with her right arm and canvassed the rear seat area, while keeping an eye on the deli door. Her slender fingers raced along the leather seat, but found no phone. She turned her head around and saw that the phone was against the crease of the right seat.

Desperate, Karen turned back around and looked through the deli's glass entrance door.

It was dirty and littered with ads from various companies, mostly for tobacco. Feeling she had a few more seconds before his return, Karen unbuckled her seat belt and reached back–stretching her whole body. Her fingers touched the phone, but she had no grip. She managed to eek a few more inches out of her five-foot-seven inch frame, and pulled the cell phone closer. It was still on.

She sat back down, keeping her right hand–which held the phone–behind her. The monster was still inside the deli. She felt for the number five button. It had a plastic bump on it, allowing for easy navigation without having to look at the keypad. She used it to dial numbers in dark places like movie theaters.

With her thumb on the number five, she worked over to the number six, then down to nine. She pressed once, expecting to hear a beep, but didn't. She pressed again and again, but no sound came from the phone. Then, she remembered the guy had been playing with it. The look on his face before he had tossed it was a look of satisfaction, like he'd accomplished something.

Karen stared at the deli door as she turned. She pressed the nine key, realizing that the bastard had locked the keys. A dark silhouette grew in the door's dirty glass. Sensing her time was up she tossed the phone in the back and sat forward. The mini-mart's door opened and the terrible man came striding out.

He walked around the front of the car and got in. He had a paper bag with him–stuff from the deli he had either bought or stolen. The rotten odor formerly accompanying him was replaced by cinnamon and evergreen. Karen guessed that he'd sprayed himself with deodorant or air freshener. His hat was gone, revealing his naked, bald head.

"Ready to go hun?" he asked.

"Yeah," Karen replied.

She couldn't help thinking of how different he looked in a suit. The video at the bank, if there was one, was surely useless. Everybody would be on the lookout for a homeless man, not a couple dressed in suits, traveling in a Mercedes. Karen felt more alone than ever.

The man told her to drive and gave her directions. By her assessment, he was leading her out of town. They stopped at another bank. Before getting out, the man pulled a baseball cap from his bag and put it on. It hung low over his forehead. A few people walked by and he waited a few minutes before getting out.

"Now–don't think about doing anything stupid. I'll be right out." He winked and left the car, locking the doors.

Karen waited, watching the surrounding area and hoping that someone–not just anyone, but someone helpful–like a

linebacker or a cop would drive by. The man returned before anyone could drive by, and they were off again. Karen's cell phone rang.

"Ignore it for now," he said. After a few seconds the phone rang again. The man turned around and grabbed it, stretching the seat belt when he did.

"If it rings again, pull over," he told her.

They continued driving, stopping only at red lights. There was no conversation. The man's anger appeared to lessen, like an inner tube losing air. His fingers no longer clenched the door handle and his cheek muscles had stopped bulging.

Karen started to feel nervous again as they reached the edge of town. He could have his way with her once they were away from people, dump her in the woods somewhere, and leave her for some hiker to find. She decided to take a chance.

"You never told me your name," she prodded.

The man didn't answer, just sat staring out at the world, at nothing in particular.

"What's your name?"

The man turned his head so fast that Karen wasn't sure he'd actually turned it at all. It was as if his face had appeared where the back of his head should have been.

"Last time I remembered, my hearing was fine," he said with clenched teeth, as if his jaw had been wired shut.

Startled–but not deterred–Karen said, "Sorry, I just thought you didn't hear me."

Silence followed her question and she decided not to test the man any further. She had a hard time figuring him out. The

crazy, hostile person from before, had entered into a transient state, but still oozed with danger.

"My name is Josh," the man said softly.

"Oh." Her heart skipped a beat at the sudden response. He had spoken like a man defeated in battle. "Are you all right, Josh?"

"How can I be all right if I killed that man back there? How can I be all right if I kidnapped a woman?" He asked as if turning his inner thoughts into audible words.

Karen guessed at once that he was on some kind of drug, probably a hallucinogen that was wearing off. It would explain the strange behavior, including wearing a homeless man's clothes.

"Turn on the radio," he told her as he stared off into nowhere.

"Why?" Karen asked.

"You were going to ask who I am, weren't you? Just like all the other questions you have been asking yourself."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"I know it all. I know you planned on locking me out when I first went to your car with you. I know you wanted to get the attention of the guy I wasted. I know you wanted to run down the street, but thought I'd catch up to you."

He paused for a moment, still looking forward as Karen drove. "You're slowing down, maintain the posted limit."

Without realizing it Karen had begun to slow the car's speed. She was caught up in the guy's words. It was all stuff anybody with half a brain could have come up with. He was

just a good con-artist, but it freaked her out.

The man turned and set his gaze on Karen. “You think I’m making all this up, Karen?”

He stared at her a moment longer, then turned forward again. “I know you live on 10th Avenue, on the 24th floor. And your doorman’s name is Ron.”

Karen was in shock, unable to comprehend what the man was telling her. There was nothing in her purse that had her current address on it. Her mind churned trying to come up with some way this guy could have known all of that information. Nothing came to her.

As the car approached an exit ramp, he told her to get off. They traveled down Wool Wash Road. Karen had tried talking, but the man told her to be quiet, and when she tried to speak, he grabbed her arm to make sure she understood.

“Pull over and follow this dirt road,” the strange man said.

Karen wanted nothing to do with going down the road. She had a feeling that he’d dump her body, leaving her for the maggots and worms.

“Stop. I’m not going to leave you for the maggots and worms,” he assured her.

Unable to speak from the fear that he’d kill her, she focused on driving. Her thoughts brought her far away. This guy was reading her mind. There’s no such thing as mind-readers. She refused to believe the words spoken from the evil menace. He was good–really good–but like a magician, they were only tricks. She asked herself about the doorman. His name is Ron and she hadn’t told him that. The license had her

address, but her old one. He must have been following her for weeks.

"Stop the car here and turn on the radio," he said.

Karen stopped, fearing her life was nearing its end. Before her mind was able to conjure images of her strangled naked body, he screamed at her to turn on the radio.

Karen pressed the knob on the radio. "What station?"

"It doesn't matter," Josh said. "But after you hear it, turn to another–to as many as you need. When you're satisfied, turn it off."

A song was playing, one that Karen didn't recognize. When the song ended the DJ's voice came over the radio. "This is Mike from JKPL and as I told you folks out there already, this is an urgent message. I'll be repeating it after every set. It's sponsored by our local military."

Karen listened intently, grabbing onto every word.

"An escaped convict is on the loose in our great city. He was last seen breaking out of a police van and heading north on Robert's Street. He is extremely dangerous and may be armed."

The DJ went on with a description–a pretty vague one–telling only of the man's physical size and shape.

"So you're an escaped con?" Karen asked, guessing he enjoyed the attention, the fame, and making the authorities look inept.

"Turn to another station, as many as you like, then turn it off." Josh closed his eyes and sat back in the seat.

Karen turned to each station on her pre-set buttons. The ones with songs she skipped over, but almost all of the others were

making public announcements to warn people about the escaped convict. She switched to AM radio. Every news station was talking about the escaped convict, Josh Rubin. Satisfied that the man sitting next to her was the person everyone was talking about, she pushed the volume knob in to silence the speakers.

"Okay," she said. The man appeared to be sleeping.

"I haven't much time, Karen, so do as I ask. Think of something only you would know about. It can be anything."

Karen immediately thought about nailing Josh in the throat, killing him, or at least wounding him enough for her to get away.

"You'll never get off the hit in time before I catch your arm and rip it off," he told her. "Do me a favor and think of something else before I get angry again."

Karen, afraid and angry at the same time, thought of her boyfriend and how much she missed him. She wished she'd get to see him again and not waste their time together, realizing how precious time is.

"Good, that's enough. I'm gonna' make this simple. I need to convince you of something. Then it's up to you what you do."

He went on to tell her about the wish to see her boyfriend again and not waste their time together, their precious time. Karen was dumbfounded, but still a non-believer. Sensing her disbelief, he told her to think of numbers in a certain order. After she was done, he told her which numbers she was thinking of, and in the correct order. Everything she thought, he guessed right, and soon she presumed that he wasn't guessing at

all.

"Now do you believe I'm more than an escaped convict? They're after me–the government."

"What do you mean after you, because of your gift?"

"Yes, I'm theirs and they want me back. I don't want to go back, can't go back."

He went on to explain how he was once a poor man working odd jobs to support his family. One day a man had approached him on the street and offered him a job. It would pay $150,000 a year for as long as he stayed with the company. Desperate, he signed on. He worked with a man who had developed the ability to read minds. The man's name was Roger Williams, a homeless man who also signed on for the cash.

The company Josh had actually signed on with was a secret branch of the military. Unbeknownst to them, Roger Williams was able to pass his gift on, and did so to Josh Rubin.

"Roger died after he gave me his gift. He committed suicide after finding out what they'd done to him. I say they killed him, he just made it final."

Josh went on to tell her his own story, how they had locked him away for experimentation. They wanted to use him as a weapon, but weren't exactly sure how. Only live test subject was all they needed. When he refused, they grabbed his wife and two kids. He had to do as they wanted or his family would suffer. It was horrible, the things they made him do. Things he was too ashamed to tell Karen.

Karen started to feel sorry for Josh, but quickly remembered how fast and easily he had killed earlier.

"That man you're thinking about," Josh began, "he was a government agent. I knew he walked that way everyday at about that time. He was the man who killed my boy." Josh started to cry.

Karen felt a heavy wave of sadness fall over her.

"Where's your wife now?" she asked.

He began to tell her, but broke down. She put a hand on his lap, trying to console him, and tears fell from his cheeks onto her hand.

"Enough of this, I haven't the time. I need to tell you the rest." He sounded urgent, like time was running out. "I can read all of your questions as we go along, so there will be no need to ask. I will answer all of them with the remaining time, so just listen."

Josh continued to tell her everything. The military men must not have known the extent of his mind reading abilities, because too many secrets were let out. Josh had learned much during his long stay at the lab. A spacecraft had been found off the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. An alien being was inside the ship. The creature was dead, but the body was fresh–as the men had put it. Even though he knew little about science, Josh put together that the military scientists had developed a serum from the dead alien. That serum was injected into Roger, giving him the ability to read minds. Roger then passed it on to Josh.

Karen listened with eyes the size of melons. Her mouth hung open without her knowledge. She pictured everything he told her, and for every question her mind formulated, he answered it. As he spoke she wondered how he could have

escaped such a place, and he answered.

"I used my gift. I can read minds from across the room, even through glass. Every security guard, worker, official–you name it, I can read them. I knew every inch of that place, every code."

"That's amazing." Josh continued, speaking with more urgency.

He told her how he had escaped and how he thought his gift worked. "I want to use my gift for good. I believe it was given to us for the betterment of others. I have to believe that, or I'll go mad. If those men get a hold of me, the world will change, power will shift, and freedom will be lost."

Karen shifted in her seat. The car was running with the air conditioner on. She went to turn it off, but Josh stopped her. "Leave the car running with the A.C. on. It's harder for them to track me. The cold muffles the signal."

"What signal? You have a signal?" she asked nervously.

"They injected me with a tracking device." Josh looked at his hands. "It's mixed with my blood, so it can't be removed, at least not anyway I know of."

"What are you going to do?" Karen asked.

"The one thing that ensures they'll never be able to use me again," he said, while lowering his hands and staring off.

"You can't. We need to get you to a doctor…the media." Before finishing, Karen already knew that wouldn't work. Even if he exposed them, another group would pop up and try to get him. Knowledge that a mind reader existed would bring chaos to the world. Josh would be prodded by scientists and never

again have a normal life.

"That's correct he told her. I have one more thing to tell you, Karen, and it's very important."

Karen swallowed after hearing the seriousness of his voice.

"There are more downed spacecraft out there, Karen, with more dead aliens in them. I have read the men's minds. They don't know exactly where, or how many, but there are more."

He went on to explain how the downed ships contained writings and symbols. From what the scientists gathered, there were eight more ships that had accompanied the one they found. A search was underway for the other ships, but not wanting to draw attention, they were moving slowly and cautiously.

"You're wondering what all this has to do with you?" he asked, having already read her mind.

"I don't have to open my mouth at all, do I?"

"No, you don't. I'll let you talk so you feel more comfortable." He paused, and then continued. "I want to give you my gift."

Karen thought she may have heard wrong, but his back and forth head movement said otherwise.

"Why would I want that? I enjoy asking questions and talking with people. I don't want military men chasing me around, threatening my family and friends."

Josh explained it was time for him to go. "It's too late, Karen, you're already infected."

Reading her mind, he answered her next question. "When I was crying–my tears fell on your hand. It's passed through

tears, and can possibly pass through other fluids–the scientists aren't sure yet. By tomorrow you'll have a migraine. That means that it's working. By tomorrow night you'll have the gift."

Karen felt dizzy and began rubbing her hand where Josh's tears had fallen. "No, no, no. This can't be," she said.

"I'm sorry Karen, but it is. It was meant to be this way. Had to be. I wasn't sure I'd give you a choice, but you felt right–that's why I chose you. I guess it's another part of the gift I haven't had time to explore."

Karen's dizziness made her want to vomit. Fuzziness began filling her vision, like static on a television with no cable. Josh slapped her across the face. Karen awoke from her spell, staring at the man who condemned her.

Josh leaned in close to her. "I need you to listen. Accept this gift and find those other ships. There must be a way somehow. Now you have to get out of here."

"I don't know what to do, where to go," she said, crying.

"Look, you're in charge. I'm sorry I had to give you this crash course in mind reading, but you'll learn fast. I came to you for a reason, I'm sure the gift helped me find you."

Josh got out of the car. With the door open he told her to trust her instincts. Tell anyone she trusted, but remember that she'll also be endangering them. The men would come after her eventually. They would find her, with all of their tools and gadgets, but she had some time before they would catch on to whom Josh had encountered.

After that, the hunt for Karen would begin. He warned her

not to be taken alive and not to let the gift die with her. “Those other ships need to be found and destroyed, the world depends on it.” Finally, he apologized for the way he had treated her earlier. “I am truly sorry,” he said.

Josh closed the door after his final speech. Karen knew what he was about to do, but not how. He walked to a rocky area where there was no grass. He pulled a bottle of lighter fluid from his pocket. Karen guessed that he had taken it from the deli. Josh doused himself, drenched his clothing until the bottle sprayed a mist, indicating that it was nearly empty. Josh tossed the bottle and pulled out a book of matches. He folded one match over and readied it to strike. With his other hand, he pulled out the large steak knife and held it to his neck.

He snapped his fingers, igniting the match, and soon after igniting the whole match book. He dropped it to his boots, which burst into flames. The fire raced up his legs, encompassing them within seconds.

Karen watched in horror as the man she had come to know and like danced with fire. Flames swallowed him like a python swallowing its oversized kill. Before the flames could reach Josh’s face, he sliced the side of his neck. His cut was deep and his body jerked as the carotid artery split open. He held a hand over the wound. Red liquid poured from beneath his hand and down his neck. Karen wanted to look away, but couldn’t.

Josh staggered as the blood shooting from his wound slowed. He fell to the ground, his body still burning. Karen guessed that burning was the best way to ensure the tears would be gone. Only ash and bone would be left for the scientists to

find.

Karen had seen enough and heeded her friend's warning. She turned the car around and high-tailed back to town. She knew not what lay ahead, and drove in silence, wondering what her future would hold. The government would soon be after her, hunting her like they had hunted Josh. She would come to accept her plight, and take the task of finding the other ships, and saving the planet from utter doom.

Newly Merged

By Deborah Walker

The visitor landed in Xi'an. The news from China was sporadic, but they couldn't control a story like that. I watched the visitor's broadcast. I read the subtitles of his first message to us. I watched the pandemonium of speculation that exploded from that first message. Following those first moments, I knew that I would respond to his invitation; it was only a matter of time.

When the ship moved to Nottingham, I knew that it was fate. I watched the message, this time rendered into English. I got into my car and drove straight to his ship. Some people call it a fortress, but it's just a ship; there's nothing sinister about it.

I felt nervous walking past the protesters, but they knew better than to interfere with anyone trying to get into the visitor's ship. They'd seen the footage from China; they knew that any violence within the perimeter of the ship would lead to a swift response. I looked up at the walls of the ship and saw the weapons flexing on their snake-like tethers. I was safe enough.

As I walked up the gangway, the crowds jeered me. It was disappointing, but words can't hurt anyone.

The visitor was waiting for me at the doorway. He beckoned me inside with a gesture of his claws. He was so tall, he towered over me. In the flesh his skin looked iridescent. I

wondered if it would feel warm or cold to my touch.

He didn't say anything at all, so I launched into the speech I had prepared. "I am Miriam Carmichael. I respond to your invitation with an open heart. I am willing to be transformed. Let us merge our genetic heritage and create something unique."

He looked at me with his unblinking eyes. He didn't speak. My speech hung there, leaving me with an uneasy feeling. I wondered if he had understood, but then, he nodded and led me towards his laboratory.

I told the government officials everything I had seen. There was no need for secrecy. I saw glass bottles with organic specimens–I think some of them were alive. I saw walls of computers, overwritten with a script that I couldn't read. More importantly I saw the operating table that he'd laid out for me. The visitor gestured towards it and I jumped onto it.

The government official kept asking me if I was coerced. They couldn't understand that I wanted to do it.

The visitor held a silver instrument over my arm. I nodded my head. He must have given me some type of drug because the next thing I knew, I was outside and the protesters were shouting in my face. I was different; I felt that immediately. The government officials were waiting for me, but I couldn't tell them much.

After such an experience, I suppose it's natural that everything feels a little flat, but I feel a little let down. I thought that there'd be some type of support program for the newly

merged. I know that the visitor is monitoring me and keeping me safe, but there's no way to get back in touch with him.

I wouldn't say that I feel used, but I feel, I don't know–I'm just grateful that I was able to merge with him before he closed the doors to the fortress.

I've had no support from any of the government agencies. After the initial debriefing they just didn't want to know. When I ring up all they will say is that they've expressly advised against anyone contacting the visitor. It's just species prejudice.

It's been two weeks since I merged. Now that my new skin has formed I don't like going outside. I can see people staring at me. One man spat at me. He actually spat at me. What have I done wrong? The only thing I did was to be open to a new experience. If only they could only understand that there's no reason to fear the visitor. He's pretty much like us, otherwise how would he be able to blend his DNA with ours?

I know that I'm safe. Everybody in the world knows what happened in Xi'an. Poor Li Hong–her only crime was to be one of the first to transform, and that mob ripped her to pieces. The visitor's response was swift. He levelled a square mile of Xi'an. He must think that we're savages. I think he was right to take his retribution; otherwise none of us newly merged would be safe.

I guess that's what some people see when they look at me–the possibility of annihilation. I'm safe enough, but feel a little isolated. It's not how I thought it was going to be, but then again, nothing ever is.

So when I saw that there was another person in

Nottingham who'd been brave enough to merge, I was pretty excited. His name is John Laxton. I contacted him through twitter. I'm going to be there for him.

John hasn't responded to my messages, but I'm not giving up. He probably thinks I'm a fruit loop or something, but I know that if I keep on trying I'm going to get through to him. There aren't many of us merged around. He'll see that. I've told him that the worst thing is the hunger. I haven't eaten for two and half weeks now–that's kind of crazy, isn't it? Talk about a great diet. It's a shame that you still get hungry, though I've advised John to offer the hunger to a higher power. That's what I do.

I went to a cafe today and sat there with a coffee watching others eat. I ignored the stares the best I could. There was an old man sitting opposite me. He held a newspaper in front of his face, but I could see him stealing looks at me. I found myself reading the headlines. I'd been avoiding the news because it makes me ashamed to be human. The way in which we have responded to the visitor is disgusting.

I wish I hadn't read that paper, it just confirmed my worst fears: mass demonstrations against the visitor, government summits to discuss strategy, talk of retribution for his acts in Xi'an. They've got a new name for him–the uninvited.

Nothing ever changes, does it? We always have to pick on someone if they're different from us. The manager came over and asked me to leave, because he said I was disturbing his

customers.

But why? Why? Just because I look different? What is wrong with everyone?

John has gotten in touch with me. Seems like the reason he didn't respond was because he was getting a lot of hate messages, and it had taken him some time to realize that I was genuine. He's been having terrible headaches, the poor thing.

I told him that it was normal. In fact, I told him a white lie–that I had headaches too. He seems sweet and he wants to meet up, but I've told him it's too soon. After all, we're newborns in a way–much too young to be dating.

I feel depressed today. My mother rang and, of course, that always puts me in a bad mood. I hate to speak ill of my own mother, but she is such a negative person. Now that I'm cross-species, Mum really has something to complain about.

Mum called me a traitor to my own race. She told me to open my eyes to the visitor.

I said "Hello, Mother–I don't have eyelids anymore–I can't help but open my eyes."

She didn't laugh. I tried to use jokes to diffuse her anger–like I always do. She disowned me, of course, but she's done that before. When I got off the phone, I really wished that my tear ducts hadn't atrophied.

Thank goodness for John. We twittered back and forth and he made me feel much better. It seems like he's been having similar experiences. He said that he was my family now and

that was really special. Poor John, he's still having the headaches.

Even though I haven't eaten, my stomach is hard and swollen. I was looking at myself in the mirror when it dawned on me: I'm pregnant. There were some stories about merged breeding on the internet, but they were immediately suppressed by the Chinese government. I stared at my stomach. It looks like the stories were true.

The visitor's reptilian; I think I'm forming eggs. It's so exciting. I contacted John straight away and suggested that we meet.

John hasn't been in contact for a day. That's disappointing, especially after what he said about us being family. I know that some men are afraid of responsibility, but come on, John–I need you.

I can see the outline of the eggs stretching out my skin. It looks so thin.

They're my babies. They need their daddy. I really need to see John.

Sometimes nature just takes over. The birth was bad, really bad, even though I tried to meditate. I thought the eggs would come out the usual way. I wasn't expecting my stomach to split open. I think it's healing now.

I'm euphoric that I didn't need John to fertilize my eggs after all. I only needed to focus on his twitter picture and that seemed to

do the trick.

I'm a mother. My babies are just gorgeous, a mix of visitor and human. I know that every mother thinks this but they're really advanced. They are really, really advanced. I'm going to be such a good mother to them. I guess some instincts have kicked in. I know they're crying constantly because they're hungry, but I don't know what they eat.

I've tracked down John's address. He doesn't live far away. I'm packing up the babies, and we're going to see him. He'll be so surprised when I turn up on his doorstep, I just know that he's going to die when he sees his babies.

The Fruits of Incubation

By Robert Essig

Kyle pressed the OFF button on the remote control, extinguishing the bickering pundits bitching and laughing at one another about the latest political scandal. At midnight the baby was sleeping peacefully in his crib and Kyle's wife, Sandy, had hit the hay an hour before.

In the kitchen Kyle drew a glass of water from a pitcher. The water was nice and cold–refreshing during a humid night. These goddamned Indian summers could be hell, so he liked to keep the windows and sliding glass door open until he went to sleep, even though the breeze was almost nonexistent.

He walked into the living room, turned for the sliding glass door, and froze in place. He was truly like a deer caught in a pair of headlights.

Something instinctual told him exactly what he was staring at–an alien–but the rational part of his brain, the part that has watched a lot of TV, read a lot of books, and watched countless movies, told him that it was some punk in a costume breaking into his house.

The form was half inside the house, clutching the screen door with something that faintly resembled a mitten–gloved hand, though it had the appearance of being slick, and the mitten-like hand was flush with its arm. The thing was average sized and stocky, its face blank except for two perfect circles for eyes that

could have been made of pure obsidian. There was no hair, no nose, no ears, and no lips–nothing but the eyes.

"What do you think you're doing in my house?" Kyle asked.

The alien form stepped inside, staring at Kyle, though it was difficult to know where those listless eyes were really looking.

Then it blinked–a paper-thin sheath gliding over the obsidian eyes, then opening again to reveal perfect gleaming spheres–and Kyle knew right then that he wasn't faced with a robber in a Halloween costume.

Kyle ran for the kitchen. He didn't know what to do. What do you do when an alien invades your house?

You grab a butcher knife, that's what.

Kyle wanted something a bit more physical, perhaps a baseball bat or a golf club, but the knife would have to do.

"Get out of here!" yelled Kyle, as if the alien figure could understand English.

It made no noise as it walked through the room, watching Kyle with those eerie eyes. It acted as if it knew where it was going. The brick-colored thing turned and focused its gaze toward the hallway where the bedrooms were, and then walked in that direction taking steps on what bared little resemblance to human feet–there were a series of tentacles that each leg ended in, shifting their musculature as the alien walked. With each step the tentacles moved to support its weight.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

Kyle rushed the creature and stabbed it in the back–ripping

gashes into its brick-colored flesh–but just as soon as he pulled the knife out, the massive incisions closed up in seconds, healing themselves.

The creature turned quickly, just as Kyle swung the knife, making contact with its wrist and lopping off its mitten–like hand.

Kyle was somewhat shocked that he had cut its hand off, but just as soon as the hand hit the floor it dissolved and reappeared, connected to the alien's wrist as if nothing had happened.

It turned and entered the hallway. This time as Kyle reached for the thing, it grabbed his arm with its digit–less hand. Kyle's body immediately went numb, his legs unable to support his dead weight. He fell to the ground, trying to move, but unable to command his numb limbs. He watched in agony as the alien took the hallway. He tried to scream a warning to his wife as it entered their son's nursery, but only blubbering escaped his numb lips.

Sandy must have heard the commotion because the door to their bedroom opened with her yawning as she entered the hallway. The sight of her husband on the ground jolted her awake.

"Kyle, what's going on?" she asked.

He mumbled unintelligible words, trying to say, "In the nursery."

"Ustin!" he yelled. She immediately recognized her son's name, and a yelp escaped her mouth, as she ran into the nursery at the sound of Dustin's sudden crying.

In the nursery Sandy came face to face with the thing that had invaded their house; Dustin was clutched in its arms.

Her motherly instincts took over when she saw her little one in harm's way. She screamed something shrill and rushed the creature, reaching to grab Dustin from its clutch. To stop her it only needed to hold out its hand, its touch causing her body to fall to the ground numb and useless–like Kyle.

She tried to scream but could only blubber–spittle and drool coating her mouth–as she helplessly watched the alien holding her son in one arm while the infant wailed. The thing opened the outer layer of its stomach like a little door, revealing an empty cavity. It then stuffed the screaming baby inside and closed the strange trapping.

The baby could be seen through the portal in its stomach. Tears flooded Sandy's numb face. She watched as what appeared to be veins inserted themselves into the baby's nostrils and mouth–perhaps some sort of feeding tubes.

The alien then moved to a bare wall and leaned against it. Its brick–colored flesh rippled from extruding tentacles, which scaled the wall and stuck into place like creeper vines.

Its obsidian eyes closed.

The incubation began.

Dustin was looking to the sky again. As Kyle approached, he could swear his son had obsidian eyes, but when the kid averted his gaze from the sky to his father, his eyes were very human.

“Looking at the sky again, huh,” said Kyle a bit nervously. Sometimes he didn’t know what to say to his son. It had been nine years since the incident with the...alien, thing–whatever it was–but he had never forgotten. Especially when he found Dustin staring to the sky, as he seemed to do just about every night.

“Yeah,” was all that Dustin said.

The boy went inside the house, ready for bed.

Kyle thought about the wasted year in which the alien had lived in Dustin’s nursery–stuck to the wall like a huge piece of overgrown vine, their son living in its stomach, being fed who knew what through eerie looking tubes in his little face. Sandy and he had cried so many nights away. They tried to free their son, but all that caused for them was temporary paralysis. The alien being wouldn’t allow them to get too close, yet it never harmed them.

The police couldn’t see the alien–no one else could–and when Dustin was officially reported as a missing child, Kyle and Sandy became prime suspects.

It was almost a year later when they heard the unmistakable scream of a baby coming from Dustin’s room. Kyle thought the crying was in his imagination until he saw Sandy’s eyes widen with a hope he thought had been lost long ago.

They found their son on the floor of his nursery–no sign of the alien except for the peeling paint on the wall where it had affixed itself during the incubation.

They told the media that Dustin had been returned to them

without so much as a note indicating where he had been. They were all over the television news for a day or two, and then forgotten about.

But they would never forget...

Dustin wasn't the same after the desperate year feeding off the brick–colored alien, incubating in its stomach like something out of a madman's nightmare.

A few days after his return was when the tragedy occurred, matched with a miracle.

Kyle and Dustin were walking down the road to the local 7-11 for Slurpies on a hot August afternoon. It was a busy road, but Kyle had traveled its cracked sidewalks enough to feel at complete ease as cars sped by, some of them at speeds topping fifty to sixty miles an hour.

They were standing at the intersection across the street from the 7-11 when a car lost control, swerving onto the sidewalk. Dustin had no chance to run before it pinned him to a telephone pole so hard that his body was ripped in half–his legs trapped beneath the mangled wreck, torso half embedded in the windshield.

The witnessing people screamed, but then the miracle happened–it was something so awe-striking and amazing that the small crowd looked like a group of Christmas carolers caught in mid note.

Dustin's mangled torso came to life and, amazingly, grew a new set of legs as if it was the most natural thing for a human to do. The boy brushed the shattered glass off–that seemed to be in every fold of his clothes–and slid off the car, looking at the

gawking crowd as if what they had witnessed was everything but a miracle.

"Wha'd I do?" asked Dustin innocently.

Once again the family was in the news, only this time it was getting scary. The phone rang off the hook all day and night; every local news station, not to mention all the national stations and radio talk shows, wanted a piece of the action.

The witnesses each had their fifteen minutes on the national news broadcasts, talking of the miracle boy who cheated death by growing a new pair of legs. It was so preposterous that nobody would have believed it if so many hadn't actually watched the miracle.

The paparazzi camped out in their yard for weeks, and when it all started to calm down, Dustin was kidnapped in the middle of the night.

Kyle stood outside the gates of a third rate carnival–ticket in hand–wondering if his exhaustive search was finally over.

The place looked grim, though laughter and old-fashioned calliope music issued through the cloak of dusk. People were having a good time, and Kyle wondered how many of them were there to see the Amazing Miracle Boy. The ad stated that he could "Re-grow limbs in seconds!"

Of all the places, thought Kyle.

Sandy and he had done exhaustive searches for their son thinking he was abducted by the government for test purposes, but they never gave up, and never would have fathomed their little boy to become a carnival sideshow attraction.

Kyle was about to hand his ticket to the creep at the entrance gate when something strange and wholly unexpected happened.

"Dad?" the voice of his son said–a voice he hadn't heard in over a year and a half.

Kyle turned, but nobody was behind him except for others approaching the gate to the carnival with their tickets.

"Dad? Are you there? I can feel that you're there."

"Son?" asked Kyle. He turned in circles, but couldn't find his son anywhere. "Dustin? Is that you?"

"Dad, you have to look to the sky. I know you're here. I can feel you. You need to look to the sky."

Kyle suddenly realized the voice was in his head and felt a cold chill like something tickling his brain. It was his son, or perhaps the alien part of his son.

Dustin, are you there? Kyle said in his mind.

Yes, Dad! I'm here! If you look to the sky, I can see through your eyes and call them down to help me.

Kyle considered this and felt a bit let down that his son was looking for the help of the thing that had held him captive for a year, the thing that scared the life out of Kyle and Sandy. Then again, wasn't that strange extraterrestrial being the reason Dustin was alive today? Without the alien side of their son, wouldn't he have died from the car that pinned him to the telephone pole?

Kyle looked to the sky, not knowing what to expect.

In the freak show tent Dustin waited with his eyes closed,

ready to peer through his father's eyes and make contact with his other mother–the one that had come from the sky and incubated him as a baby.

The next show was scheduled to begin shortly. It didn't hurt when his limbs were cut off to be regenerated for gawking audiences, but being restrained–held captive and hauled from town to town–was torture.

Dustin looked through his father's eyes at the starry sky, immediately making contact with his alien mother. She has been waiting for him, worried because he hadn't made contact in so long. He made calls of distress.

His second mother made her descent from the stars she calls home, every instinct in her being calling out to save her human offspring.

Dad? Dustin asked telepathically.

Yes, son.

Wait outside the carnival. I will be out very soon.

Then, Dustin closed his telepathy and waited for his alien mother to save him from the torment he'd been living with as a sideshow freak.

A few moments later the curtain concealing Dustin from the gluttonous carnival goers drew back. He hoped it was his second mother, but it was only the beginning of the eight o'clock show.

"This, folks, is the most amazing thing you will ever see in your lives. After what you witness in this tent, you will hunger for something more fantastic, but never find it on the planet, for there is nothing else out there like The Amazing Miracle Boy!"

The freak show exhibitor was wielding a sword when he stepped into the tent with Dustin, who sat on a stool, shackled.

"The boy," he pointed his sword at Dustin, "is a true freak of nature. I am almost certain he cannot be killed for he re-grows any limb I cut off. Watch!"

With a swipe of the sword he severed Dustin's hand. The crowd awed; Dustin flinched. No matter how many times his limbs were cut off, he expected pain that never came. Within seconds his hand reappeared, driving the audience to collectively gasp, even louder than they had when the hand was cut off.

The exhibitor grinned, reveling in the astonishment from the crowd. A commotion was then made as a figure waded through the onlookers.

Dustin smiled for he knew it was his alien mother. He had never seen her–having only known her as a baby–but he could sense something. As the brick–colored figure took to the front of the tent, the people she touched dropped to the ground with limbs of jelly–her touch infectiously numbing.

"What the hell are you doing?" screamed the exhibitor as if the thing standing before him was natural to Earth. "Get outta here!"

Dustin's eyes glazed over, becoming the same obsidian as his second mother's eyes. Receiving her thoughts, he knew that once again he was safe.

The exhibitor slashed at the alien mother with his sword as she effortlessly broke Dustin's shackles. In turn, she grabbed the exhibitor with her eerie, mitten-like hand, but it wasn't

numbness he felt in her grip–no, the numbing effect she used was for defense and mercy. The man she gripped was to be killed for what he had done to her human child. So, she filled him with pain and left him writhing on the floor, quivering and screaming until his body gave up and died.

Dustin left with his alien mother; his hand in hers felt no numbness or pain for he was very much a part of her.

She returned to the stars, and he went home with his father where he was met with happy tears and hugs from his first mother.

After moving to a small town where no one knew about Dustin the Miracle Boy, things died down and became fairly normal. Dustin was strange–that was for sure–but preposterous as it seemed, his parents learned to accept the fact that their son was part alien.

In their small town Dustin's secret was safe. There wasn't much gossip, and crime was almost nonexistent; which is why such a commotion was made when the Greenford's baby was abducted, five houses down from where they lived. The abduction brought back bad memories for Kyle and Sandy. As for Dustin, he turned fourteen and had been communicating with his second mother nightly, learning about reproduction.

Every night after talking to his second mother, just before bed, he would lift his shirt, look at the Greenford's baby incubating in his stomach, and smile.

Heir to a Vacant Throne

by Patrick Rutigliano

Nestled in the seat of his recliner, Frank Ellis sat with his back to the window. He did not dare look over his shoulder. Instead, he kept his attention focused upon the tiny spot of crawling blackness on his living room wall.

The cockroach probed the cracks in the paint at its leisure. Even with limited intelligence, it knew there was no threat to its existence. However, it was completely unaware that Frank had named it Irving.

Frank shuddered as a breeze caressed the back of his neck. The wind smelled of pine and wet grass, but he did not turn. Instead, he squinted even harder at his little roommate. He knew what awaited if he dared glimpse the world again. He wouldn't be able to enjoy the scene for even a second before the thing that had exterminated the human race would creep into view–to meet his gaze, and to watch.

It mattered little that the creature was already observing him. Frank had adopted the philosophy–out of sight, out of mind–and he found no reason to abandon it. The supply of canned food was holding out, and the fire pit sledge-hammered into the kitchen floor was adequately ventilated by a few well-placed holes in the ceiling. There was no reason to acknowledge anything beyond the four rooms in which he lived.

Still, the scent of the air reminded him of what he was

missing. If any electricity was available in the building, he would have barricaded the window and tried to altogether forget the paradise outside.

Frank couldn't recall exactly how many weeks were lost since he last saw the outer world. The buildings he'd explored near the start of his ordeal had become overgrown ruins, and all the others were crushed to rubble. Frank still remembered how he had thought the planet itself was splitting in two when they all came crashing down. Like the apartment building, only those places that were of any use to him were left–familiar places.

Even in such a vast area, the thing could pinpoint him. He was aware of the ghostly fingers that probed the contents of his brain, though they always left whenever he chanced to scream. Only once had they drawn attention to themselves, and that was the day before the awful din of the collapse–the day that Frank had watched every animal in the city march down the streets as if held captive in a trance. Little Irving was all that remained behind. Every other beast resided somewhere in the jungle of green, its expanse stretching from the end of Frank's street to what seemed the edge of eternity.

Man was not so lucky.

It was all over before it started. The vessel descended and hovered mere feet above Frank Ellis's car on the day of its arrival. There was no threat, no warning, merely a flash of light. Then, all that was humanity burst. Frank had only time to blink his eyes before human life was reduced to shadows glued to the facades of buildings, its end too sudden for so much as a

whimper.

The thing's head then passed through the skin covering the ship's belly, as if through water, and locked eyes with the last of the species. The orbs were black, but Frank was close enough to make out the tiny pinpoints of light burning in their depths. He could withstand them for only an instant before he was back in his seat and flooring it back to his apartment.

The thing followed, dodging every step he made from that point onward. Only the ship was absent. The creature preferred to do its tracking on foot.

Try as he might, Frank was never close enough to retaliate. He had spotted the alien numerous times while scrounging, but never within twenty yards in the open. It moved up the sides of buildings on a lizard's feet, its mind always aware of how far Frank could throw or how fast he could run.

Frank tried a gun just once. The creature's tiny pupils flared as the hammer clicked uselessly on every chamber of the revolver. In the end, all Frank could do was drop the weapon and weep.

He had since given up on revenge. He could only ignore. The thing was aware of this, and yet it continued to stare at him every moment of every day.

Frank sank deeper into his chair. Why did it have to do that? Hadn't it won the war months ago in one fell swoop? Didn't it know that by now? Did it intend to do nothing more with the rest of its days than simply screw with him?

His fingernails bit into the leather hide of the recliner. What the hell could a thing like that want of him?

After a year of waiting for an answer, Frank Ellis finally exploded.

The vein running up Frank's temple bulged. He turned and raged at what waited a dozen feet behind the window.

"You little bastard! What the hell are you waiting for? If you're going to off me, just get it over with already! I'm sick of waiting on your lazy ass!"

His rant over, Frank waited. A full minute later, his frustration vented through a wordless scream that left him hoarse. The thing did not even blink; it merely scrutinized.

Frank wandered to the closet in a daze. He felt the eyes watching as he retrieved the extension cord from the clutter. A strange sense of peace came over him while he tied the noose. Wherever the rest of humanity was, he would be with them soon, and he would never have to see that inscrutable face leering at him ever again. Even beyond hope, he was still a man, not some damned zoo exhibit.

The cord bit into Frank's neck as his body swayed hard enough to knock the chair to the floor. Dangling, gasping, he twisted in full view of the window.

Slowly, the thing ventured closer. It crouched on all fours and scuttled faster.

Frank's breath began to fade. His vision was almost gone by the time he realized the thing was in the apartment. He tried to close his eyes in vain as the thing tilted its head and watched. It was only in the end that he understood.

Just before all faded to black, Frank caught the creature's gaze moving to the wall. It settled there on the Earth's last

model of a pest and Eden's last denier–a small spot of crawling blackness by the name of Irving. Frank had never observed any emotion in the alien before, but he saw it then, for there was no way to catalogue the creature's body language other than suspicion.

The Swarm

By John McCuaig

"You're making me nervous!" Jack scowled at Debbie.

Her hand was shaking around wildly, the light from the torch she held flittered all over the engine bay. He looked up and saw her eyes darting all around, peering deep into the darkness, searching for them.

"Come on, keep it steady, girl. I just need to connect the new battery and we'll be off." He tried his best to reassure her, but it was a waste of time. Far too many times she'd seen what had happened when someone was caught by The Swarm.

Their car had given up about a mile away; the damn engine had blown up. He knew when they found another, its own battery would be flat. He removed the battery and carted it along the road until they finally came across an old and battered van. The wasted time had brought down the night and they both knew that The Swarm wouldn't be too far behind.

"Please hurry up, Jack. We need to get back to the kids. They'll be worried to death by now." Debbie's voice was quivering.

He didn't believe her. He was sure that she wasn't only worried about her kids. He knew she was terrified of being devoured by The Swarm. Who wouldn't be?

Those damn children, he thought. If it wasn't for her and her

kids, he wouldn't be outside in the night right now searching for food; those little bleeders just couldn't stop eating. Sometimes he wished he was still just by himself–that when Debbie and her four eating machines had walked past his new home, he hadn't gone soft and offered them shelter.

"It's done, come on. Get in the van, Debbie. We're getting the hell out of here now." He took a few deep breaths before turning the ignition key. The big engine turned over several times before it coughed deeply and spluttered into life.

"Crap!" Just when he thought they were sorted and heading home he heard them coming. That damn clicking sound filled the air even above the loud and heavy thumps of the cold engine. It sent a shiver down his spine.

He remembered when he had first heard that frigging noise, about a year ago, back when they still had television. A mass, consisting of over a thousand asteroids, flew in from somewhere in deep space and crashed to the ground all over the world. When the asteroids started to cool, they poured out from those inter–stellar lumps of rocks.

Billions upon billions of beetle-like insects appeared. As they spread out it soon became clear that they had an insatiable appetite for meat, spreading like a Swarm of locusts.

No one knew where they had come from. Captured specimens were shown off to the watching and waiting nations. They were pure jet black, the size of a large egg, with a dozen close together, spindly legs which caused the clicking noise as they scampered around. The cameras also showed their rows upon rows of razor sharp teeth.

As soon as they landed and hatched, they attacked in vast numbers, feeding on any and every type of animals they could find–cattle, sheep, and even cats and dogs. This led man to try and destroy them before they could eat all of our food and furry friends.

The problem was The Swarm fought back.

No matter how many were killed, more rose up from beneath the Earth and joined in on the attacks. Whole platoons of soldiers–armed with flame throwers were devoured as The Swarm burst through the ground beneath where they marched. Even tanks and armored vehicles were targeted; the tiny beasts could find the smallest holes and cracks and get in to feed on the helpless.

Once the so–called mighty armies of the world were defeated, they came to feed in the towns. All that was left of Jack's little rural town was Debbie and her kids. They only managed to keep safe at night by staying in his old workplace-the High Street Bank. Its airtight steel vault was their bedroom.

"Hold tight, Debbie!" He shoved the van into gear and slammed his foot down on the accelerator. The damn clicking surrounded them– so loud it was almost deafening–and the next thing they heard was the crunching and popping as they drove over them, over that carpet of beasts covering the entire road.

Debbie continued to look out of the windows, noticing that this little slice of The Swarm was thankfully thinning out. "Please, Jack," she pleaded. "Get me back home to the kids."

"Don't worry, doll. I ain't planning on doing anything else." He almost laughed at another one of her stupid remarks.

They spun at full speed onto the deserted and moonlit High Street and raced back towards the bank. Debbie screamed at the sight before them. The entire Bank building was covered in a huge black mass- a squirming and evil mass of insects.

"Oh God, Jack. The kids won't be inside the vault, they won't be safe. You have to help me. We have to get them out." She grabbed his arm and looked at him through her tear filled eyes.

He looked at the Swarm covered building and then out towards the clear and open road in front of him.

"Don't you frigging dare…don't you even think about driving off!" She screamed as she grabbed him by the neck. "You can't leave them. They'll be eaten alive! Please Jack, please save my children."

"Why the hell did I get frigging involved?" Jack sighed deeply and thought over his options. "Screw it. I am now so I guess I ain't got a choice."

The van wheels spun in a cloud of rubberised smoke, as he once more slammed down on the accelerator. The van fired off towards the bank.

Night and the Desperate Moon

By Timothy W. Long

There wasn't time to sleep, there wasn't time to hide, there was barely enough time to turn and shoot back. Sweeping blasts of plasma ripped into the defenders like a wave. Men and women were cut down in mid–step, body parts cauterized as they fell. The 'thunk' of a torso or leg falling to the ground was an eerie sound that Harold Davis never wanted to hear again. But hear it he did.

"Are you okay?" His wife's worried voice buzzed in his ear. It took several seconds to arrive, so she would've heard him scream, "*fall back!*" She also would've heard the searing beams cut the air, and the screams of pain and horror.

He stumbled into a fox hole, fell forward, and landed on top of his rifle. That was going to leave a bruise or two, his voice gibbered in his head.

The hole was a blast crater. The ground was scorched and smelled like burnt wood and leaves. It reminded him of the yearly bonfire he and Amy used to host in celebration of their birthdays, which fell just two days apart. There was another smell that was not as pleasant. The smell of scorched meat.

A pair of eyes locked on his and then went dull as life faded from them. It was just the upper half of a female fighter, her black hair loose and hanging across her forehead, giving her the illusion

of a tousled head in the morning. Her torso was severed just above the waist and a part of her arm lay a foot away. He gasped for breath and tried not to scream.

He glanced over his shoulder. An ovoid was descending, with extended killing wings covered in more weapons. They opened fire and laid waste to the routed army. He tried to make his body as small as possible, while keeping a view of his comrades as they ran in terror.

The pulsing beams stabbed outward over and over. Nothing was left alive in the spots they struck. Another giant, ovoid object sailed across space away from the ship. It exploded, lifting Harold off the ground, and slamming him down as if he'd been dropped from a plane. As his breath left his body, the shock wave from the explosion struck, making it impossible to taste air.

He rolled over and covered his body with a nearby corpse. He rubbed blood on his face and prayed that they wouldn't find him. Amy's voice kept yelling in his ear, demanding to know if he was okay. If Harold wasn't so scared–he was about to shit his army issue pants–he would have answered.

Over the lip of the crater he saw the routed fighters disappear in a burst of brilliant white that left his retinas scarred. Then, his goggles darkened and his eyes were saved.

"Please Harold, please answer me. Please tell me you are safe."

"I'm not safe, love. None of us are. We will never be safe again."

He wanted to howl at the injustice of it all, at the invaders

ruthlessness. Was it only a month ago that they arrived?

Amy was at moon station delta when the news came in. Station beta and gamma were offline and there was speculation that the object closing in on Earth for the last few months was somehow responsible. Harold listened to her projections about how the thing was moving too fast to be from this solar system, but not too worry because there was no way it could strike the Earth.

She had a perfect view of it from the station where she and a team of seven worked on a new energy source for Earth's depleted resources. He saw it through her eyes when they went interactive. He smelled the air she breathed. He felt her love for him, and returned it in kind. He was so proud of his wife and her hard work on the massive Tokamak power plants. She told him that her job was to maintain the magnetic fields which manipulated the enormous amounts of plasma.

She had moved to a projection window as the object drew closer and closer to the earth. It was still on a parabolic course to shoot past the Earth, and then return, fighting retrograde orbit all the way. The object was huge by computer projections–but she was close enough to make out its shape– and through their link he was able to experience the view.

"It's slowing," he said.

"That's not possible."

"Projections say it is."

"I know, but it can't be. It is just an asteroid."

He stared at the thing through her eyes for a while, and then

she retired for the night. When speaking, they tolerated as best they could the delays in transmission. The implants were the latest in low band, neutrino-based technology, but it still took a couple of seconds to reach him.

It was a week before the news started broadcasting an emergency message about a possible impact. Super weapons were dispatched on two frigates and sent out to destroy the asteroid.

The news stations reported that Earth command had lost communication when the crafts were fifty thousand kilometers away from the object. When it started to break apart, command assumed that the ships had succeeded and the object was no longer a threat.

Harold watched in horror over the next few weeks as it slowed and broke into even more pieces. Communication spots on the moon and around the earth went offline. Speculation ran rampant that it was a rogue movement from a colonized world, intent on starting a war with earth over equal rights. It sounded so ridiculous to Harold that he and Amy laughed about it over a glass of wine they shared in virtual space.

It was a week later when they arrived. Thunderous impacts shook the atmosphere as the ships bore down on the planet. Each was massive in scale, larger tenfold than anything the British or Americans had put together. Thousands fell, darkening the sky. To Harold, they looked like a swarm of bugs.

The coverage went on for hours and he wondered if they would ever stop pouring into the atmosphere. There must have been

a million of them.

The attack started once they hit. Dull–grey colored Ovoid ships the size of small cities–scarred from asteroid impacts assaulted every military establishment in the world.

India was the first to strike with a nuclear weapon. It hit one of the ships–which disappeared in a burst of dirty matter that turned the sky white, and then grey as the remains fell to earth. The news casters nearly stood up in their chairs and a collective shout could be heard from the studio. That died a moment later when the ships struck back with a retaliatory blow that wiped India from the face of the planet. The weapons they employed were also nuclear, but larger than anyone could imagine.

Harold watched the broadcast and the news shows where scientists debated the state of the invader's technology. They compared it to that of Earth's–with its super–weapons, nano-tech–and the disparities became clear.

"We are out gunned," he said to Amy one night, while he huddled downstairs on the couch. Fear kept him inside and the round-the-clock coverage of the war glued him to the telecaster. Three-dimensional representations of the battles were drawn on his living room floor. He stayed on the couch and sometimes remembered to eat.

Once in a while he would pick up a virtual feed and sit in the cockpit of a fighter as it screamed across the sky. His implants allowed him to feel the crushing weight of going eight gravities, which was somewhat alleviated by a gel seat. It was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

The tiny Israeli ship he followed on the third night of the

invasion lasted much longer than its companions. The ovoid ships were armed with stuttering plasma guns that tracked and shot down anything that got too close; so fighter wings of hundreds of vessels had to be put together well if they wished to do any damage. The plasma weapons rarely missed, shooting in blasts of eight which laid waste to the Israelis.

He stayed with the fighter through the first wave, gleeful when a missile shot away from the fast moving craft. It struck a communication blister which burst apart like goo. Then it swept in and targeting computers picked out other strike areas to deliver their payloads.

The final strike came after his right wing was clipped. He was falling fast from a great height when a plasma beam leaped out and turned the white ship into a burst of flame and debris. Just as the beam struck, a bomb dropped which shattered across the surface of the craft. The nano enhanced super-weapon melted the hull. Microscopic hunters ate into the skin and boiled past everything in their path.

The ship plummeted to the earth below and landed in a deserted section of Jordan. Harold found himself cheering in his living room, jumping up and down when the ship disintegrated on impact. Parts of it broke off during the fall and sped away, but after the fires went out, most of the craft was a ruined hulk.

The cheering faded when Israel was assaulted anew; then Jordan, then Egypt. The smaller ships extended wings were covered in weapons similar to those used against the attacking vessels. They carved out a path of destruction that ended at the larger cities. Armies appeared on the ground and were washed

away. The cities were leveled, not in a mindless bombing that left the city ground into the dirt, but in a systematic way that left much of the place intact. Why, he pondered aloud.

"They are saving everything, easier to colonize. At least that's what they are saying up here." Amy had access to government contacts so he took her word for it.

"Why did they destroy India?"

"To send a message. Do that again and we will radiate your entire world."

"God. Who are they?"

"No one knows. They are well organized, but refuse to answer any of our messages. We can't figure out how they communicate. There are no binary emissions, no tight beam, and no low band."

Harold felt safe in his little home outside of Chicago. There was much speculation as to why they had not attacked the United States. A ground war had even started in the former Soviet Union as the forces blazed a path of destruction, but nothing could stand in their way. Conventional weapons were shrugged off and even a counter to the nano-bombs had proved too much for the advanced technology to cope with.

The countries of the world fell one after another over the proceeding weeks. There was no mercy, no sign of regret. The invaders just came on cold and heartless. Their single minded purpose seemed to be the eradication of everyone on the planet.

Hunter drones patrolled the skies, and mercilessly picked off any person that showed their head. Deep lasers opened up and drilled into the earth where it was presumed people were

hiding. Harold curled up in fear at the thought–all of those people living like rats in caves–when a cold beam of death tears into their hiding place without warning.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm tired of being scared, love. I haven't left the house in over a week. It's chaos out there. Nowhere to buy food, nowhere to get fuel. Fighting in the streets–the churches calling it some kind of second coming. It's all they talk about on the news and I am sick of it."

"I wish I was there with you." She sent comforting thoughts of warmth and love.

The next day, Harold went to the garage and took out his travel pod. It unfolded from the wall and he slipped inside. He traveled streets that were covered in debris and abandoned personal transports. He passed military members, going this way and that, and ducked as war ships hurtled over head.

He came to a recruitment office for the ground forces and signed up to fight. The place was a mess as they tried to process all of the recruits. A DNA signature was done on him and he was moved to another room filled with eager faces–young and old, male and female. They looked ready to start fighting right then and there.

He sat in a corner and listened to small talk, but kept to himself. Amy had left her communicator on so that he could listen as she went about her job. He loved the sound of her voice when she interacted with others, Sometimes it cut out, presumably when she was talking about sensitive matters.

They asked him if he had ever served, ever fought, was he

familiar with weapons, hand to hand combat? He answered no to every question and the man in the crisp uniform smiled and told him not to worry. They would find a place for a man who was a teacher. He was told how much they appreciated his service and willingness to join in the fight.

He shipped out the following day with a basic combat SIM embedded in his head, a couple of weapons, and a manual on how to use them.

Amy fed him restricted information. She showed him projections from the government computers on the approaching forces and where the battles would most likely start.

"Love, why do you want to fight them?"

"What choice do I have? I can stay at home and watch the holo-vids but that won't help anyone, and I will go crazy waiting for them to come and burn our house to a cinder. Does anyone know what to do? Do we even have a chance?"

She was quiet for much longer than normal.

"We don't know what to do. There has been talk of massive nuclear strikes but it may lead to what happened to India. A vote was put before the council and they said to wait a few days, see if the invaders stay away from America."

"They won't."

"You don't know that!"

"They are just waiting, saving the best for last, call it what you will. We won't last when they arrive."

They spoke of other things well into the night as his ship sped over the landscape. Harold studied the other recruits.

Some stared at walls with shocked looks on their faces, some were scared, and others were just mad. Harold felt none of those emotions. He was just glad to be out of the house and making a difference.

They struck that night. Ships fell from the sky by the thousands. Most were larger than football stadiums. They had an ovoid shape that helped shrug off traditional weapons.

A brilliant blue beam leapt from one and sheared the ship in half. His seat closed up around his body as the basic AI struggled to protect him. The craft plunged to the ground and broke apart upon impact. He gasped for breath on the gel couch and tried to remain calm, as his world came apart around him.

He lost consciousness for a moment as the remains of the ship crumpled into the ground. Alarms sounded, and punched him back into reality. He rolled out of the seat and sucked in a few breaths. His gear was intact and when he stumbled away from the wreck with a couple of survivors on his heels, he couldn't decide on which direction to run. The night was alive with the cries of the dead and dying. He saw a man crawl out of the torn ship with one leg hanging by strips of flesh.

He turned to stare into the dark when a pair of goggles settled over his eyes. They had an opaque quality, but tugged at any lights and amplified the shadows. He listened to the night, but all he heard was a buzzing in his head. Then he knew the buzz for what it was.

Screams.

Amy's voice came in frantic waves when he couldn't

respond.

"I'm okay, I'm alive," he sub-vocalized into his throat mic.

"Oh Harold, you scared the shit out of me! What happened?"

"We were hit by something. We went down and the ship broke into pieces. My seat saved me. It was one of those gel things like we have in the car, just closed up like a second skin. I'm not even bruised." He was babbling hysterically, but calmed down long enough for her to send reassuring thoughts.

Then, a ship came over the horizon and he was on the move. Harold consulted the online manuals to figure out how his pulse rifle worked. He extended the stalk and barrel and hauled it over his shoulder as he tried to look through it while running. He came across a building, just a warehouse really, and dove into the opening.

Others pounded after him, confused faces filled with dread and fear. Harold crouched and looked out of the opening, the way he'd learned while watching soldier action holo-vids. As more soldiers arrived, the first deep, blue rays reached out and cut them down. Some screamed, but most fell without a sound.

The ship was smaller than the ones on the holo, and was far more frightening in real life.

"Harold, don't do anything stupid."

"Too late," he muttered, thinking of how he had gone to the recruitment office just that morning.

There was no one to take charge, no one to step up and tell the others what to do. So, Harold stood up and looked into the other goggled faces.

"Anyone have any idea what the hell we are supposed to do now?"

A few nervous laughs. He glanced outside at the ship that sped into the night. A pair of larger ones dropped down behind it– roving forward– presumably searching for targets. One raced to the east with an eerie whir that grated on Harold's body like he was holding a chainsaw.

"Where am I?"

"What?"

"I don't know where we crashed. Can you get a fix on me?"

"Yes, give me a minute to get to a station."

He waited–for what seemed like an eternity–while she ran to the station and punched the keys. The wait was made worse by the delay, as the signal crossed the great void of space between him and the moon.

"You are about thirty miles east of Los Angeles."

"Okay," he sighed.

"What do you plan to do?"

"I have no idea love. This is a bad spot. No leadership, no guidance, no way to find another group of soldiers. We are all fresh recruits. I have a couple of combat SIMs but nothing else."

"It's better than nothing." She sounded hesitant.

He realized that she was holding something back.

"What aren't you telling me?" he asked.

He wondered how she looked at the moment. Was her hair down? Those long brown curls that framed her face, making her

look younger than her years. Not that she was old–neither of them was. How he wished he could touch her.

"We are in talks up here, the other stations we–I–can't say anything just now. We are preparing for the worst."

"Are you in danger?"

"Everyone is. The thing is, they don't negotiate, they don't respond. All they seem to want is our death. A couple of countries even tried to surrender but it did no good. The peace vessels were torn apart and the killer ships swept over France and the UK like a plague."

An explosion in the distance brought him around, her voice echoed in his ear. No surrender?

A veritable storm of ships rocketed across the sky and engaged the aliens at close range. The flash of beam weapons was hot and fierce. The air reeked of burned ions. He and the others hunkered down in the warehouse. A group of men with tiny rocket launchers ran from another building and soon their rounds arced into the sky.

The battle raged for hours as ship after ship was sent forth. Drones raced over the ground and launched accelerated rounds at the ovoid attackers. A pair of the invaders' ships exploded in brilliant white, but there were hundreds in procession, each covered with weapons.

"What do we do?" somebody screamed. He glanced from face to face and saw that they were all eager to join in the fight; only the fight was moving east as the invaders pressed on.

"It's like that all along the coast. They're invading the center. The heartland is falling. The president has just

authorized the release of super weapons. I'm sorry love."

"I'm sorry, too." He wished that he'd never agreed to the yearlong separation. Her work was very important. The thought of a perfect energy source was long the domain of science fiction. Environmentalists had gone crazy when the first gigantic Tokamak generators were discussed. So to appease them the things were built on the moon.

"Let's fight," he yelled, as dozens of American ships fell from the sky. The ovoid ships shrugged off most of the attacks. Some were damaged and burned in spots, but lurched on regardless.

"Let's take one down, one of the damaged ones!" He added loudly. Faces looked up at him with fresh hope.

"Do it," Amy sobbed into his aural implant.

Harold steeled his will, put aside his fear, and walked into the night. Twenty or thirty of the recruits followed. They ran along a low hill, beside a road that had seen better days. There were no cars running, but a pair of abandoned ones laid a quarter of a kilometer away, so the group made for them.

A ship wandered overhead trailing smoke and flames. It flew low and gave off a curious buzz that made Harold's teeth ache. His manual had informed him that his weapon had a derillium load. The tiny missile would bore through just about anything and would explode with impressive force.

He pointed at the gaping wound that trailed fire and gave a fist pump. He meant it to say, 'Let's put some straight up their ass', but wasn't sure it came across that fiercely.

Four armor clad men slipped forward, their combat suits

going dark in the gloom. They found a spot near the back of a gas station–beneath the massive craft–and let loose with their weapons. The flight was brief, the rockets trailing ion streams as they streaked into the night. Harold did his part by moving into their spot and firing. Then he fell back.

Multiple rockets made a mess of the enemy ship. A cheer rose from the assembled men and women. The ship turned over once, presented the burning bottom to the sky, and then exploded in a brilliant flash of white and yellow. They fell back into the warehouse and waited.

Harold felt immensely proud of his actions and sent his love to Amy along with a full report. She told him that he was very brave, but her voice still contained that hint of sadness, which he attributed to his own resignation to death.

"How much longer can we hold out?"

"Not long. That wave was just the first. I am sorry to say that there are hundreds of the giant ships dropping from the sky right now."

"And each one breaks into how many parts?"

"Best guess is three or four hundred."

Harold was silent for a moment as he stared up at the falling stars. The next attack came, this time from the grounded craft. A small army of human defenders ran in front of it and were cut down. An errant missile found the warehouse and the building lifted into the air with a 'crump' that shook the ground. Harold's suit hardened as he was flung into the air. He landed, and rolled over a couple of times.

His face bounced off the dirt. He laid on his back staring up

at the massive ship passing overhead.

Then the exodus came. Some were able to run, and some moved slowly to support their injured comrades. They fell over each other as the invaders cut them down. There were screams in the night, howls like banshees. Harold tasted dirt and knew that he would soon taste his own blood.

"How can we stop them?" he said aloud.

"We can't. Within two or three days everyone will be dead except for those underground, and the monsters will find them as well. Projections say that within months there won't be anything left. Nothing, Harold!"

He jumped to his feet and fled to the front of the oncoming army. He tried to join the flow, but people dropped all around him. That's when he found the crater.

A second ground craft lurked behind the first.Harold tugged the dead bodies over himself and shivered in the predawn chill. He planned to move when morning came, even though he knew it would mean certain death.

"I've had the best years of my life with you, love," Amy said from hundreds of thousands of kilometers away.

"I'm not gone yet." He sighed and tried to smile for her–it felt like gallows humor at its worst.

"But I won't be for long. I'm sorry," Amy replied.

"Are they coming? Are you okay? Can you get out in a ship?" He was so frantic that he was practically screaming into his throat-mic.

"The moon, my love. It will be our salvation. The

Tokamaks are channeling into the crust and in a few minutes we are going to turn off the cooling. Keep looking up. I love you." Then her voice trailed off with an ominous echo.

Harold rolled and peered over the edge of the little crater. He followed the rise of the horizon with his eyes, until he could see the moon full and bright in the sky. Harold tried to picture her on the base–safe–maybe looking for a place to hide, a ship to escape in.

What did she mean about the massive plasma reactors? He knew from her explanations that the cooling system kept the molecules in line. If they started colliding with each other, then they would reach the temperature of the sun in a nano-second.

There was no sound, but there was a flash of blue and white light. It turned the sky bright as day and then the most amazing thing he had ever seen in his life happened. The moon–as if in slow motion–cracked like a giant plaster ball and slowly, oh so slowly, broke into several pieces.

He stared up for hours as the invaders assault grinded to a halt. They seemed stuck, perhaps confused, but Harold knew the meaning. Over the next few days the moon would continue to pull apart, destroying the gravitational hold it had on the oceans. The oceans would rise and cover the lands.

The worst would come much later when the massive pieces of the satellite hurtled to the surface of the earth, obliterating all life. If we can't have our planet, then no one can.

"Farewell, my love. I will see you soon." He said staring

up at the sky. He could have sworn he heard Amy's sigh on the wind.

Church of the Deviate Minds

By Jameson T. Caine

The wild-haired man glared at Kenley, eyes full of accusation and anger. “Release me!” he yelled, spraying the glass with saliva. He pounded the door with his fists and screamed again, a primal cry of frustration.

“Moving on,” said Doctor Harris as he stepped further down the hall, forcing Kenley and the other interns to keep up with him. She shot the wild-haired man one last glance as she rushed by the door to his room.

“Our next case is a new one. He arrived here just two weeks ago and is something of a puzzle. Classic multi-personality dementia.” Harris stopped before a door, which was identical to every other in the antiquated facility. “The intriguing part is the rate at which the various personalities change–one will be dominant for hours, while at other times, they will cycle every few seconds.”

“What’s his name?” a blonde woman asked. Kenley remembered that her name was Astrid.

Harris looked up from his notepad and regarded the group of interns. “Mr. Carl Sands, whom some of you may have heard about in the news.”

“What did he do again?” a dark skinned young man named Jared asked. “His name sounds familiar, but I’m drawing a blank.”

Stefan, another intern, chimed in. “He’s the guy that tried blowing up the Governor last month during a rally at the capitol building; went running at him with dynamite strapped to his chest. The damn fool fainted before he could get within twenty feet.”

“What was his beef? Did he lose his job in this bad economy?”

“No, he claimed the voice of God told him to do it.”

“Yeah, I remember that now,” Jared said. “He claimed something about God coming to him in a bright light that fell out of the sky one night, while he was walking his dog.”

“And God told him to blow up the Governor, of all people?” Astrid asked.

“Yep. Apparently God informed him that our illustrious governor was possessed by some sort of demonic entity or some such nonsense–”

“None of that is important right now,” Doctor Harris said. “What we need to be concerned with are potential treatments for him.”

Kenley tuned out the others as she approached the door to Sands’s room. She peeked through the small window set in the door, spying a frail figure at the far end of the cell, sitting on the bed and facing the opposing wall.

She recalled seeing Sands on the news and hearing recordings of his paranoia-fueled rants, and imagining him to be some larger than life lunatic bent on social disorder. Here was a man that embodied the exact opposite. He was a short, slight, balding man that appeared unassuming and somewhat pathetic.

Any bluster he once exhibited seemed long gone. He sat hunched on the edge of the mattress. Despite not being able to see his face, Kenley could tell that his jaws were moving in conversation, most likely with either himself or an imaginary person.

Realizing that Doctor Harris was leading the group of interns further down the hall, Kenley turned and followed.

Alone in his cell, Carl Sands stared at the wall and tried to calm his inner turmoil.

"Fools. All of you," he muttered, his voice a hollow whisper. "Can't you see? I tried to help you. I tried to unmask the demon in your midst, but you did not listen. Don't you see? God is with me."

Silence filled the room. "God was with me," he announced in realization.

He stood and craned his neck to gaze at the ceiling. "God," he said imploringly. "Why have you forsaken me? I did my best to fulfill your wishes. Why have I been abandoned? Why have I not been taken into paradise?"

He waited, but no answer was forthcoming. God had stopped speaking to him. He had lost that connection with something holy and pure, right and true, and now he was diminished. He flopped back onto the bed, his despair complete.

"You were rash. You acted without authority and nearly tipped our hand to our demonic foe." The voice was low and flat, devoid of emotion or gender. It filled the room, yet simultaneously, sounded only within his mind. "Paradise is

something you have yet to earn."

Sands smiled in joy. He hadn't been cast aside after all. "I have always been with you," the voice said, as if it knew his thoughts.

"Indeed I do know," it continued, "for I reside deep within the chaos you call a mind. I know you better than you know yourself, and I see your potential for redemption."

"I can do better," he said. "Please, Lord. Let me try again."

"And if you fail?"

"Then damn me forever."

"Perhaps I already have, Sands." Was there the slightest trace of amusement in that voice? "However, you can still be of use to me."

Elation filled Sands. "I'm yours, lord. Name the task and it shall be done."

"All in good time, Sands. We cannot fail to prevent the demon that has escaped from hell to wreak further havoc on the world, and since there is strength in numbers, we must locate other like-minded individuals that can be of use to our cause. However, this requires freeing you from your prison before we can begin."

The scream split the air–startling everyone in the hallway–with both its volume as well as its bone-chilling timbre, sounding to Kenley like a soul cast into the fiery depths of hell. She looked around in confusion, trying to determine from where the horrible sound had originated.

"Sands!" someone yelled. Indeed, now Kenley could tell

that the agonizing screams were coming from his room. Filled with terror, the voice faded away into nothingness as if the owner had fallen into a great chasm, drawn away from the world of the living.

Doctor Harris pushed past Kenley and made for the door to Sands's room, keys jingling in his hands.

"What's going on?" an intern asked. No one answered him.

Kenley–curious herself as to what had just transpired–crept closer to the door as Harris unlocked it, and then rushed into the cell.

"What the hell?" asked Harris, startled.

Kenley dashed through the doorway to see Harris standing over Sands, who laid on his back staring at the ceiling. Even from a distance, she could see the expression of fright and pain etched permanently into Sands's features.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harris said, bending down to examine the body. "There seems to be something wrong here." He gasped in shock. "His head!"

"What? What is it?" Kenley asked.

Harris turned the body over, revealing a gaping hole in the back of the cranium. No blood poured out from the wound. Harris shook his head in denial. "It's his brain. It's...it's..."

"It's what?"

"It's gone!"

Carl Sands knew rapture.

He realized that when God had promised to free him from

his prison, it was in reference to the confines of his fleshly body, rather than the aging structure that had been the mental institution. He ascended to a level of awareness beyond all he had previously known, his mind was literally free.

One moment he was alone in his cell and then–after a brief moment of blinding agony–he was being lifted up by God, casting his physical shell aside to dwell in the spiritual realm of the almighty. His former senses were left behind and he floated into a dark void bereft of stimuli. Still, such was the overpowering majesty of God that Carl could not help but sense his proximity to such divine power.

"Is this heaven, God?" he asked. Through the darkness, he sensed a vast intellect scrutinizing him, such as an insect crawling across the ground would consider a man. He shrank from such greatness.

"No, Sands. There is no such place. At least, not as you envision it."

"I don't understand."

"You will, in time."

"If this is not paradise, then where are we?"

"Why, Sands, we are still within your mind. At least, the weak physical aspect of yourself, that you call a brain."

"My brain? Why?"

"I have need of it. To carry out my mission on this planet requires a different approach than before. I can see now that your species is weak, and relying solely on you to complete this task, would be a mistake. After careful consideration, I have formulated a new plan for apprehending the Waheri."

The Waheri? Sands was utterly lost. What was God speaking of? What mission would God need to undertake? Hadn't God chosen him to carry out the holy crusade?

"You ask too many questions," God said, reading his thoughts. "If only I had been stronger upon emerging from the dimensional vortex, there would not have been need to merge with the first sentient being I encountered. Alas, my matrices were unraveling and I required a safe place to hide. You were my only option."

"I was not your chosen vessel?" he asked.

"You were convenient. At first I hoped you alone could be utilized to complete my task. Drawing upon your own primitive ideologies and beliefs, I thought I could persuade you to take the appropriate action on your own, but I was wrong in that assessment. Your fervor was greater than I had anticipated and–in your brashness–you acted before I was ready. It is fortunate I was able to stop you in time. Your impetuous actions have nearly handed victory to my foe. Now that I have regained my strength, a new approach is necessary."

A thought came to Sands. This was a test! Surely God was only testing his resolve, seeing if he truly possessed the will to attain their goal, no matter the requisition.

"This is no test." It was a cold reply. "It is time for you to know the truth, so that you will accept your fate and hinder me no more. Learn, Carl Sands. Learn and weep for your species, if not for your own pathetic self."

God opened the vast intellect to Carl Sands, revealing the terrible, terrible truth. Sands tried to scream in horrified denial,

but remembered that he no longer had a mouth.

With a growing sense of annoyance, George Cordova looked at the clock on the kitchen wall and swore under his breath. A few feet away his two assistants, Emil Kobler and Susie Martin, were busy preparing the lunch trays for the second floor patients, with the cart containing the meals for the first floor waiting by the door.

Where is Jimmy? George thought, eyeing the cart. The fool had better get his ass here soon to deliver these trays. George knew the impressionable youth was easily distracted, and wondered how the kid had managed to keep his job this long when George and the others had to constantly remind him of his duties.

He toyed with the idea of pushing the cart through the kitchen doors and into the hall. That would save Jimmy some time, but George realized that he needed to have yet another talk with the young man to remind him that work was no place to be slacking off.

He returned to the ladling of soup into bowls, wondering for the umpteenth time when he was going to finally get off his own ass and go to culinary school, so that he could make something of himself in a real kitchen. Preparing bland foods for mentally ill losers was far from his ideal job.

"What the hell is that?"

Emil stared at the vent cover in the ceiling. "What do you see?" George asked the other cook.

"I dunno. I thought I heard something and when I looked

up, I was sure that I saw movement. Maybe it was just a rat loose in the ducts."

"Don't say that," Susie chimed in. "George might want to catch it and serve to one of the psychos in this joint. I'm sure one of them would eat it."

George was ready to offer his own sarcastic response, when the vent cover fell abruptly to the floor, and something small dropped out of the duct onto Emil's head. George glimpsed something resembling a pink sponge.

Emil instantly grabbed his head and tried to scream, but his voice died in a wet cough as liquid was forced down his throat. George took a step closer to see the thing that had fallen from the vent–a human brain.

Not only did the organ move impossibly on its own, but long appendages that appeared to be made of blood had somehow coalesced into tentacle-like limbs, without splattering all over the place. They encircled the other man's neck, their ends pushing ever deeper down his throat.

Emil jerked and thrashed–like a puppet in the hands of a man suffering a seizure. A hideously loud crack sounded through the kitchen. It came from Emil's skull being broken open like an egg. In shocked disbelief, George watched as Emil's own brain emerged from his shattered cranium, as if it was removing itself.

The entire sequence of events had unfolded in a matter of seconds. Susie opened her mouth to scream, but Emil's brain leapt from his falling body to land deftly on her face, cutting off her cry of fear.

George told himself to run and not look back. After all, how was he ever going to become a great chef if he made foolish decisions? As he aimed his body for the door, he took a last glance toward Emil's body. He saw the first brain–too late– as it threw itself through the air, bloody tendrils outstretched and reaching for him.

"Where did the brain go?" asked Doctor Andrews, director of the Trinity Falls mental institution for the criminally insane. Upon learning of Sands's unusual death, he had immediately initiated a lockdown of the facility. Sixty-three patients and the small group of interns were stuck inside until the situation was resolved.

"I don't know," Kenley heard Doctor Harris say. She and the other interns waited in the hall. Though they had been instructed to keep back, a few had wandered close enough to overhear the conversation through the open door to Sands's room.

"Well, someone had to have done this," Andrews said.

"I'm not sure how," Harris replied. "We visually confirmed that Sands was alone just a moment before the screaming began. The door was locked, and I entered mere seconds after the screams ended. This was what I found." He gestured at the body on the floor.

"How long did the screams last?" Andrews asked.

"Not more than ten seconds, fifteen at most."

"So whoever did this entered the room in less than a minute, ripped out Sands's brain, and then exited with it in less

than twenty seconds?"

Harris nodded.

"What about the air vent?" Andrews asked.

Harris raised his head to regard the ceiling high overhead. "What about it?"

"Could the murderer have entered or escaped through there?"

"I suppose it's possible..." Harris said, frowning, "but it would have taken an acrobat to reach it so quickly, without being seen. It also would have required a contortionist to remove the cover, enter the vent, and then replace the grill–within such a confined space–but again, it would have needed to be accomplished in a matter of seconds."

"True, however, I just don't see an alternative way in or out."

"There's also the issue of the blood, or the lack of it." Harris pointed at the floor and then the walls. "Anyone absconding with a recently removed organ would scatter blood everywhere, but as you can see, there isn't a drop."

"It's a real mystery," Andrews said. "But right now we have to operate under the assumption that there's a killer loose in the building, possibly using the ventilation system to move around. In this case, we need to ensure the safety of the other patients."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth, than the screaming began.

Jimmy Reynolds emerged from the staff bathroom, stuffing

the roach clip into his pocket before looking left and right to see if anyone was watching. He made for the kitchen–not wanting another tongue lashing from that asshole George–which required him to pass through the patient ward on the first floor.

He traversed the hall in silence, head down and eyes staring at the floor. He was almost to the end when he finally realized something was off. Normally when staff passed that way, many of the patients would see them and begin screaming one thing or another. Yet, the patients had been silent all day.

He turned and looked back down the hall. The small glass window was missing from every door, though no broken glass littered the floor. Approaching the nearest door, he peeked through the opening. The patient within was stretched out on the bed, and gazed at the ceiling vacantly. A quick survey of the floor showed that all of the patients were in a similar state.

Frightened, Jimmy hurried for the exit. He knew he had better report this, especially after the death up on the third floor. He reached for the doorknob, but stopped when he heard a slurping sound behind him. He turned and saw nothing.

The sound came again, this time originating from above. Looking up, he stared in disbelief at the dozen or so small forms clinging to the ceiling and coming his way–sliding across the white surface like malformed slugs.

Only...they weren't slugs.

Jimmy screamed and rushed through the doorway.

The cacophony of voices sprang into agonized song simultaneously, a discordant chorus of tortured souls lamenting

the cruelty and hopelessness of their sudden fates.

Kenley stared at the other interns in shocked confusion for a fleeting second–caught unaware by the abrupt aural disharmony–before she realized that the anguished voices were coming from rooms on either side of the hallway. Behind each door, some unseen torment was inciting every patient on the third floor to howl in misery.

Harris and Andrews emerged from Carl Sands's room, both looked puzzled. "What the hell is going on?" Andrews asked.

Before anyone could answer, the amalgamation of voices abruptly ceased; the hallway was plunged into silence. Confusion was shared by everyone.

The door at the far end of the hall was flung open, expelling a figure that careened towards them. Kenley saw that it was a youth dressed in one of the institution's uniforms. As he stumbled closer, she read "James" on his nametag.

"Jimmy!" cried Doctor Harris. "What is going on?"

Jimmy slid to a stop, arms waving and eyes wide with fear. He tried to speak, but couldn't get past three or four words before beginning a new line of thought. Finally, he pointed in the direction he had come from, and yelled "They're dead! They're coming!"

Harris tried to steady him. "Who is dead, and who is coming?" he asked.

"Everyone!" Jimmy cried. "Everyone. The first floor and the second floor. All dead." Unexpectedly, he began to laugh the maniacal sound of a person who has lost their grip on reality. "They've escaped!" he said. "They sure did. Every

single one of them, escaped. Now they're on their way up here. Followed me up the East stairwell they did."

Doctor Andrews stepped closer. "The patients have escaped?"

Jimmy just laughed. "Yes, but not from their cells. From their bodies!" Sagging to the floor, the youth continued to giggle.

Andrews looked at Harris. "We had better look into–"

He was cut off by the sound of glass breaking. Kenley looked around and noticed that the glass window in each door was gone. Oddly enough, they all seemed to have fallen back into each patient's room and not spilled out into the hall.

The sound arose of something moist moving. Along with the others, Kenley stared in shock as small pink forms–not much bigger than her fist–started to climb through each open window. Some interns gasped, while others screamed at the sight. She wasn't sure what she was looking at, but once one plopped onto the hallway floor and she could get a better look, she realized they were brains–human brains.

Backpedaling away from the organ, she joined Harris and Andrews at the far end of the corridor. The other interns rushed to follow her; not all of them made it.

A brain leaped through the air and landed atop Stefan. He clawed at it, but it danced over his head like a spider. Long, blood red tendrils coiled around his neck, cutting off his scream. A loud crack followed and Kenley saw his head pop open, his own brain freed from its meaty prison.

More screams arose, but they fell silent when the door at

the opposite end opened. Kenley expected to see a security guard or employee standing there, but what emerged into the hall was something else entirely. She watched in horror as more and more disembodied brains came sliding through the doorway–ten, fifteen, twenty.

Suddenly she knew what Jimmy had meant when he said that the patients on the lower floors had escaped from their bodies. She knew then what had caused the patients to scream in unison, and why two brains had emerged from each room. It had been a coordinated, perfectly timed assault on the third floor patients, the invaders no doubt entering via the air ducts as Dr. Andrews had surmised.

The door behind the group opened. Harris and Andrews both screamed, falling to the floor while clutching their heads. Even more brains poured through the door, having ascended the West stairwell. They were trapped between the two brain fronts. Within seconds both Andrews and Harris were quiet and still, their skulls were cracked open to allow their brains egress.

The army of gray matter swarmed over them, launching themselves through the air like pouncing predators. Kenley flung out her arms, knocking brains aside as they flew towards her. The others did the same, but the number of attacking organs was too great, and she saw several interns and orderlies go down–their final screams cut mercifully short.

Screaming in terror and denial, she continued to wave her arms through the air, fending off attackers who were suddenly not there. The silence pressed in on her and she opened her eyes, realizing only then that she had squeezed them shut.

The brains were converging in the middle of the hall. The ones from the floors below were joined by the newly freed specimens of the third floor patients, as well as those of the staff and interns. Kenley noticed that only she and young Jimmy the orderly had been left alone. They watched together as the brains began to squeeze into one great single mass.

Noticing that the way was clear for her to escape down the West stairwell, she started to inch toward the door. She had barely gone three feet before her body went rigid, refusing to obey her commands. Everything below her waist had gone numb.

"You may not leave," a voice said.

She looked around, but the only living person was Jimmy, who had curled into a ball and was giggling softly to himself. It couldn't have been him that had spoken.

"It was not him," said the voice. This time Kenley wasn't sure if she had heard it out loud or only within her mind.

"Both."

She stared at the amorphous mass of flesh. "Is that you?" she asked it.

"Yes and no. I am in here, but I am not alone."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am...was Carl Sands."

"I can't move."

"The Waherim won't allow it. You might endanger it by leaving."

"The Waherim? What's that?"

"An alien from another world. It opened a dimensional rift

to Earth, in pursuit of another of its kind. It wants to stop the other before it destroys our world."

"And it does this by killing people?"

"Its ways are different. Sacrificing a few to save the whole is acceptable to it. It uses the flesh of living things as its tools."

A thought came to Kenley. "This is why you tried to kill the Governor."

"Yes," Sands replied. "The Waheri took residence in him, just as the Waherim used me as its vessel."

"And the whole God angle?"

"Just the way it manipulated me into obeying its will." Did Sands sound defeated? There had been a note of depression in his voice.

"Why did it take all those brains?"

"It's using them to build an organic supercomputer called Overmind, constructed from all those organs. Which is why I can speak with you. Its energies are focused elsewhere at the moment. It will aid the Waherim in its quest to eradicate the Waheri."

Long slim tendrils reached out from the mass of brains, stretching along the floor and finding the bodies of the recently slain. The corpses were pulled towards the Overmind and Kenley could see that they were already being pulled apart, limbs removed from torsos, and bits of flesh dissolving into pools of sticky goop.

"Now what's it doing?" she asked, unsure if she really wanted to know the answer.

Sands responded in the same calm, bodiless voice. "It's

constructing a new body for itself. Something more akin to its original form."

"What happened to its body?"

"Only energy can pass through the dimensional rift. Once here, it resided within my mind, but now it wishes a body for itself."

As Kenley watched, several bodies were broken down into components before fusing with one another. Flesh melted and reformed into new shapes. The jagged snaps of bones breaking and reshaping turned her stomach. As the indistinct mass of flesh started to take on a more definitive shape, she saw that it would resemble nothing human, and look more like some monstrous spider–like thing, with multiple legs supporting a bulbous body that stood low to the ground.

With a wet smack, the hideous thing pulled itself from the floor and scuttled away from the pulsing Overmind to where Jimmy cried on the floor. Without the slightest pause, the thing settled over the youth and Jimmy was absorbed into the creature, his living flesh feeding it and helping it to grow.

She screamed and tried once again to run, but her body refused to obey.

"You cannot leave," Sands said.

"What does it want from me? To eat me?"

"No," Sands answered. "You are to be its First."

"First what?"

"The First of its followers. You will retain your mind and body, but will devote yourself to its cause."

"Like hell I will! You tell it to go fuck itself! You hear me

Sands? Sands!"

Sands did not answer. Instead, the horrible Spider-like thing stood and turned in a circle. When it stopped, she saw four large eyes–each easily the size of a compact disc–regarding her.

"You must obey," the distant voice of Carl Sands's called out to her.

"No!" she cried and struggled to free herself from the invisible grip that held her. A pounding grew in her head, synchronous with the pulsing of the Overmind and worse than a dozen migraines. Instinctively she knew that the monster before her was invading her senses. No, she screamed over and over within her mind, trying to force the unwanted presence away. Somewhere in that mental landscape, she heard dozens of voices screaming as one.

New thoughts entered into her mind, alien thoughts. She tried to fight them off but failed. As her inner defenses collapsed, she shied away from their groping presence but couldn't hide. They found her, half-buried in the recesses of her psyche. They clung to her and wore her down. Then she felt clarity of thought that she never thought was possible. She welcomed them then, embraced them as she would a lover–no a master. A God.

Kenley started to laugh, but her voice held no amusement, only a mixture of fear, revulsion, pleasure, and anticipation. Her body shook spasmodically. Yes! She would find those that had been infected by these unseen invaders, the Waheri. She would purge their minds, bodies and–if necessary–

their souls of the evil within them. She would gaze into the madness in their eyes, knowing that they were evil. Hers would be the hand of righteous fury, reaching out to punish the wicked and cast them forever into the fiery depths of damnation. She would do it all for the benefit of mankind. She would be remembered as a fighter, a hero, a savior, and when she finally fell to the sinful hordes, another would be chosen to take her place.

She turned and regarded both her new multi-legged God and the throbbing Overmind.

There was much work to do.

Their new church would need to be cleansed before new adherents could be brought into the fold.

The Last Hero

By Alva J. Roberts

The car sputtered and died as the last of the fuel ran out. Michael reached into the backseat and grabbed his backpack. He was going to have to start walking. He had to keep moving. The Others could fly over any minute.

A thick forest of ancient pine trees lined the road, cloaking most of the nearby fields from his vision. He could see a light in the distance. Whoever they were, they had to have a generator, the power plants had all been destroyed.

There was only one way to find out. He pulled his trench coat tight around his body and stepped from the car, turning the headlights off. No use in leaving them on. If the Others did a fly over they would see it–their instruments would feel the car's electrical system. When he got to the farmhouse, or whatever it was, he would have to shut down their generator. The Others were attracted to electricity, but just about everyone who knew that was dead already.

Michael lit a cigarette as he walked. The smell of burning tobacco drowned out the scent of the pines. He had four cartons in his pack, and some food and water. He'd already started rationing the smokes; there was no telling when he could get some more.

As soon as he passed the trees, he could see where the light was coming from. It was a farmhouse. Cars and pick-up trucks were parked all around it, and he could see armed guards patrolling the area. A huge group of people gathered between the house and the bright red barn. They seemed to be listening to someone speak.

He should just leave. There were too many people, and they had a generator. The Others would be drawn like a moth to a flame, but this moth could snuff out the fire. Michael hesitated, but continued walking forward. He had to warn them.

"Hello! Don't shoot! I'm human!" Michael called.

He could feel rifles trained on him. Michael raised his hands into the air. A man came up behind him and took his pack. Michael hoped he would return the smokes.

"Bring him forward! Let's have a look at him!" A voice shouted.

Michael was dragged to the front of the mob. He self-consciously pulled the trench coat tighter. Everyone was staring at him. A big man in coveralls stood in an empty space at the very center of the crowd. He was middle-aged with dark brown hair.

"You ain't from around here. Why'd you come to my farm? This compound is for Militia members only."

"I was just passing through and my car ran out of gas. I saw the light," Michael said.

He glanced around the crowd. Over half of them were children. They needed to shut off the damn generator.

"That's a likely story. You're probably a sympathizer," the

big man said. “The Others gonna’ follow you here?”

“No, but they could show up any minute. They’re attracted to electricity. You need to shut down your generator,” Michael said, trying to sound calm. The last thing he needed was a bullet in his head.

“Search him,” the big man called.

For a second Michael pulled the trench coat tight, but then he let it go. There was no way he was going to be able to hide his identity. They were going to see, no matter what he did. He let the coat fall to the ground and stood before them in skin tight blue and gold. A mask hung from the back of his neck.

“It’s the Electron!” A teenage voice squeaked.

“Well I’ll be damned. We got us a genuine super hero,” the big man said. “Maybe we should call him a super coward.” The crowd laughed.

“It doesn’t matter what you think about me. You need to shut down the generator.”

“When the Others came we saw you on the TV. You were at the Battle of Manhattan. The whole Legion of Heroes fought ‘em there. They died like heroes while you ran away with your tail between your legs.”

Angry murmurs rose up from the crowd. There was nothing Michael could say. For the most part, it was true. The sight of the Others’ massive armies had unnerved him. He ran.

“That isn’t important! You need to listen…”

The butt of a gun smashed into Michael’s face, cutting off what he was going to say. Men ran forward and tied his hands behind his back before he could react.

"No, you listen. Cause we're going to have us a trial. And when we find you guilty of cowardice we're gonna' string you up."

Michael mumbled a protest as the butt of another gun cracked into the side of his head. He fell to his knees and rough hands jerked him forward. Michael felt energy start to build up inside of him, but he stopped it. If he used his power it would draw the Others like a beacon, and these people–no matter how misguided–were innocent. He could not use his power on them.

He tried to voice his protests–to talk the people out of their vigilante justice–but he only mumbled something unintelligible through his numb face. Some of the men came running up with a rope; they were going to do it. The crazy bastards were going to do it.

A loud hum echoed off the barn and purple and green light filled the sky. Everyone stopped. The Others had come.

Panic gripped the mob. Their momentary bloodlust was replaced by fear. The throng of people ran in every direction. Someone knocked Michael to the ground and a heavy foot kicked him as someone ran past.

"Stop! It's just one ship! If we stand together we can win! Get the children into the barn, c'mon! Militia form rank!" The man in the overalls shouted, bringing a small semblance of order to the screaming mass of terrified people.

Michael ran for the pine trees, crouching low. His hands were still tied behind his back and his side ached. He knew better than to try to fight.

The pine needles scratched Michael's face and the smell of

sap filled his nostrils as he ran into the thicket. He stopped short–three men were already huddled together, hiding in the trees. Their white-knuckled hands clutched rifles to their chests. From the smell, Michael guessed that at least one of the men had been so scared that he soiled himself.

"Cut my hands free!" Michael hissed, turning to wiggle his restrained hands at the men.

"You'll protect us?" One of the men asked as he stood. "You're a hero, that's what you do. Right?"

"Sure." Michael could feel the cold touch of steel against the bare skin of his hands, as the knife cut the ropes.

As soon as the rope was free Michael spun around. His fist landed squarely on the man's chin and he fell to the ground dazed.

"I changed my mind. You'll have to deal with this on your own."

"But you're a hero! You said you'd protect us!" One of the men yelled.

"We're sorry–" the third man's voice cut off in a strangled groan, as a long purple tentacle wrapped around his neck. He clawed at the appendage as his face turned blue.

Michael watched–horrified as thin trails of blood ran down the man's neck. The purple-hued limb tensed and there was a loud popping noise. The man's head flew through the air. Blood sprayed upwards from his torso and showered the entire thicket with a grisly rain. Flecks of blood spattered against Michael's face.

More of the grasping feelers reached out from the darkness.

They clutched the other militia members. The tentacles squeezed tight and the men's bodies burst like overripe fruit. Blood splashed through the air in sheets, running in rivers across the hard cold ground.

Michael turned and sprinted away from the monsters. He could hear gunfire in the distance, but the only sound nearby was his own panting breath. He closed his eyes and tried to catch his breath. There was a crunching noise from something moving through the underbrush behind him.

"Help! You have to help us! You're a hero. You're the Electron–you saved the whole world at least a dozen times, you can stop the Others," A squeaky voice whispered. It was the teen that had first recognized him. The boy had lost his glasses somewhere and tears streamed down his pimply face.

"Look kid, everyone has to help themselves. Just keep moving– you're far enough away to be safe. I have seen enough death to last a lifetime. There are no more heroes. All the heroes are dead," Michael said, wiping the blood from his face as he walked away from the boy's pleading voice. He had enough pride not to run, not while the boy was watching.

A thunderous crack echoed behind him. Michael spun in time to see the tree next to the boy topple over. Dirt sprayed into the air as the roots were torn from the earth. The boy let out a high pitch shriek that was quickly muffled by the fallen evergreen, which crushed his lanky body to the ground.

Purple tentacles retreated from the base of the tree, slithering backwards. A throbbing purple mass rolled forward out of the darkness. Tentacles protruded from the blob at odd angles, as if

some mad god had placed them according to the voices in his head. It was one of the Others.

"No!" Michael shouted. Energy filled his body and his hands crackled with unspent energy.

The globular mass turned towards him with outstretched tentacles, waving them through the air. The monster reached for him. Michael reached back.

There was a loud boom when the air was heated to fifty thousand degrees Fahrenheit in a millisecond. The shockwave spread outward, shaking the ground. Lightning lanced from Michaels hands. The Other flew twenty feet through the air and smashed into a thick tree. Its smoking, pulsating form slid to the ground in a stinking, dripping mess.

Michael reached down, his arms crackling with power, the electricity adding to his strength. He picked up the tree and tossed it effortlessly to the side.

"Kid? Wake up. Kid!" Michael shouted. He could not touch him. For three days he would crackle with power, and would not be able to touch anything. That was how it worked. He could save the world, but never touch it. Or he could forget about his power, his duty, and just be normal. He couldn't do both.

"Electron? It hurts, it hurts bad," the boy whispered as blood ran down his chin and his last breath gasped from his lungs.

No. There was too much death. Michael buried his face in his hands. Too many had died. He would not let the boy die. Michael reached down and let his power travel into the boy's

body. The boy jerked up, gasping for breath. Who needed a defibrillator?

"Protect the children! We have to save the children!" A voice screamed from the farmyard. Rifles cracked and echoed. Michael could hear the screams of dying men.

He turned towards the noise. He took a deep breath and wished that they hadn't taken his smokes. He pulled his mask over his face. It was time.

He sprinted back towards the farmhouse. As he ran, he pulled in more and more power, letting it fill him like a giant battery. Energy crackled across the surface of his body.

Thick, sticky puddles of blood covered the farmyard and dozens of bodies lay scattered around the barn. Dismembered body parts floated in the gruesome red pools. Only one of the Others had fallen. There were still over a hundred of them just from that one ship and they had a few thousand more ships they could call.

Michael could barely see the barn through the cover of the purple slimy blobs. Tentacles tore through the worn wood. Rifle fire reverberated inside the barn.

"Stop!" Michael screamed, letting loose a blast of lightning that tore through three of the monsters and shook the whole clearing with thunder. "There has been enough death! It has to end!"

The Others turned as one and rushed at Michael. Electricity thundered through the air, sending crackling waves through the alien monsters. They dropped one after another, but there were so many of them. They closed in on Michael's position, their

tentacles snaking out and reaching for him.

A long slender limb encircled his leg, pulling him to the ground. Snake-like appendages pounded into him. He felt his ribs shatter beneath one of the blows, and then there was a cracking noise as his left arm shattered. He screamed in pain and reached out, grabbing a hold of one of the feelers, letting his power channel into the monster.

Michael struggled to his feet, lashing out with lightning. Blood dribbled from his nose and dripped off his chin. A purple gelatinous mass loomed over him. He screamed in rage as his power ripped through the monster. It flew through the air and smashed into the courtyard below.

The farmyard was still and quiet. Large purple lumps covered the yard, smoke rising from their otherworldly corpses. The few remaining guards stared around in a numb daze. Some of the children poked their heads out from inside the barn.

"Get out of here!" Michael screamed. "They're all going to be coming!"

"What are you talking about?" The farmer in coveralls asked, clutching a bleeding stump where his hand used to be.

"They're attracted to electricity–get the hell out of here! I'll keep their attention," Michael screamed.

The crowd scattered, running for the cars and trucks. Michael stumbled forward and leaned against the barn. Huge clouds of dust rose up from the tires of the fleeing trucks.

Michael took a deep breath, trying to ignore the pain. He let the power fill him as he had never before. The air around him crackled with energy and bolts of electricity shot out from

him, striking the surrounding metal objects.

Purple and green light filled the sky. There were dozens of ships filling the sky. Michael stared upward grimly, gathering his power. He grimaced in pain at his broken arm and his ribs, but it would all be over soon.

For a brief moment thunder tore through the air and pure energy ripped across the sky, illuminating the darkness. Some of the space crafts imploded from the shock and others veered off course, smashing into the Earth in clouds of dirt. Brilliant red beams returned fire. Then, the world grew dark and still, except for the crackle of fire that engulfed the barn, and the smoke that rose into the air.

Jeb and the Taladradoras del Cerebro

By: Jeffrey Wooten

He slapped his forehead and stared disgustedly at the corpse. "Aw man."

The body lay on the steel floor, blood oozing from its ears. Jeb clicked his headset on, "We got another one." He rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Fresh kill, maybe thirty minutes ago."

His headset let out a static blast and he winced. The static settled and Captain Lara Cornwell's voice came through in a crisp English accent, "Find them Jeb…all of them." There was a long static-filled pause. "Or don't come back." The static ended abruptly, leaving Jeb alone in the perpetual semi-darkness of the bottom deck of Herc One.

He let the subgun hang by its harness as he took a fresh cigar from his shirt pocket and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, thinking. He would start with the labs–of that much he was sure. He would start there and work his way aft, driving anything alive to the rear bulkhead. Something could slip by him he supposed–he was only one man after all–and common sense said it would take twenty men to do a proper search, but Jeb preferred working alone, always had.

He rocked his thick, muscular neck side to side, making his spine crack and pop. He stepped over the dead body, careful not to tread in blood, and headed down the hall. He walked slowly

toward the labs–the muzzle of the subgun pointing the way–and sulked over the captain's reaction. He hadn't expected her to be overjoyed or anything, but she could have been, at the very least–more understanding. These things were sometimes complicated, and occasionally it took a dead body or two before the scope of the problem could be realized. Jeb shivered, remembering a particularly nasty job a few months back.

Garutes are nasty bastards–half slug, half crab–and a hundred percent vicious. One had somehow gotten past sensors and security during a refueling stop at Monde De Vigne, bore its way through two steel cargo doors, and ate ten beef cattle and four crewmen. The word "ate" being used loosely seeing as a garute uses acid to liquefy its meals before ingestion.

There had been other things even more dangerous, if not more disgusting, than the garute–things that destroyed cargo, ate at the ships circuitry and metal, or saw humans as food. You had to learn to adapt, to be flexible. He wondered if it was too much to ask for a little patience.

Jeb's boot steps echoed down the corridor. The sting of the captain's last words hurt the most: Or don't come back.

Around the next corner he saw the first of the labs behind a grit–stained window. He went to the door and the urge to curse welled up as he tried to turn the rusted wheel latch.

The door to the lab wouldn't budge. "Motherfreaker," he swore.

Not-quite-cursing was what Lizzy called it. To Jeb the words didn't feel right yet; they rolled off his tongue awkwardly, but he'd promised his ten year old daughter Lizzy

to try and stop using foul language. He'd crossed his heart and hoped to die and, never mind the dying, he'd made a promise to his little girl.

He found an old rusted pipe and used it as a lever on the wheel latch. He had to put all his weight on the pipe to move the rusted mechanism, but inch by inch it slowly rolled, and the door finally creaked open. The smell of mildew poured from the room beyond, making Jeb's nose twitch. He stood in the doorway and let his eyes drift over the room. It had been years since anyone had been down there; the air tasted damp and unused. The lab tables that dotted the room were covered in a fine powdering of dust. Overhead the auxiliary lights hummed quietly. Jeb entered the lab.

The alien, or aliens Jeb now supposed, had gotten in with a shipment of timber from Capstone. They were what the locals called taladradoras del cerebro or–in good old English–brain drillers. Jeb had killed one, two days ago, after a maintenance crewman had gone missing. There was at least one alien left, maybe two. The problem with brain drillers, as Jeb saw it, was their size. They were small–maybe as big as a chihuahua or a medium-sized cat, and they could hide anywhere. They could also walk on walls like spiders and had hundreds of tiny, needle-like teeth. Jeb pulled the cigar from his mouth and spat tobacco juice on the steel floor. The labs were empty.

It was a long night. The rooms beyond the labs all looked the same: dusty, rusted, and more importantly, empty. He worked methodically for hours, clearing empty rooms and walking down empty hallways. His eyes grew heavy and his feet started to ache.

He was tired, dog tired. He wanted to shower, to see Lizzy for a few minutes, and then collapse into his rack, but he had seen no sign of brain drillers–minus one dead body–and he was maybe three-fourths of the way through the search.

What if he didn't find anything? He was thinking about what he would do, mostly of what he would say to Captain Cornwell, when he heard the scratch of tiny feet on metal. He stopped to listen, and then heard it again. For the first time that night Jeb grinned. A rush of adrenaline washed over him, melting away his weariness, and he sprinted the last few meters to a half open hatch at the end of the hall. At a dead run he kicked open the door and came to a halt, two strides inside the large, empty space.

Silence.

Of the six cargo holds, the room was the largest–its walls, ceilings, and floors made completely of metal. The lighting was minimal, and the room hung in a state of disrepair. The walls were stained with rust and small puddles of water sat in pockets along the floor. The lights were halfway up the walls and didn't cast enough light to illuminate the ceiling, which was covered in a stagnant shadow.

Then he heard it again. Something was on the ceiling at the far end of the room–the tiny clicking and sliding of exoskeleton on metal was unmistakable. Jeb was dirty, tired, and wanted a nap. He hated anything resembling a bug or a cat–or for that matter, a chihuahua–so he let loose with the subgun, blasting the far end of the ceiling with hot lead and phospho rounds. It felt good, real good.

The gun chirped in Jeb's hand for several more seconds and then stopped; the slide locked back and smoke rose from the barrel. He dropped the empty clip and was reaching for another, when an object fell from the ceiling and landed with a crunch. Jeb grunted and walked the length of the room to where the object had fallen.

The taladradora del cerebro lay on the ground quivering. It looked more like a spider that way–belly up, and six insectoid legs twitching. Its fur was covered in a brownish-yellow blood and its eyes, large and dark, were glassed over. Jeb kicked it with his boot. The alien was dead, dead as Caesar, and Jeb felt a surge of primordial satisfaction looking at his kill.

In the darkness above, the scrape of exoskeleton on metal sounded–followed by another, and then another. A cacophony of hundreds of tiny, hard feet scraping metal rang out from above.

The first alien landed on Jeb's head, knocking the cigar from his mouth. Something hard and sharp slammed into his ear and there was horrible pain. He grabbed the little monster and hurled it into the wall. It crunched like glass, and was dead before it hit the floor, but the click and slide of drillers above was near deafening.

Years of training and countless dealings with violent alien life-forms kicked in.

He ran.

The things fell from the ceiling like rain. Jeb dodged and juked, stepped on something yielding, and felt a satisfying crunch under his boot. One hit Jeb in the chest and sunk a row

of fangs into his shoulder. Jeb let out a howl of shock and pain and crushed the thing against his chest with the subgun. It cracked and spurted brown-yellow blood everywhere. Others hit him, slashing with their razor sharp tongues, or biting with their tiny horrible teeth.

Jeb ran for the door. He made it through and slammed it shut. He locked the latch and slid down the wall, panting as the brain drillers threw themselves at the steel door.

Then there was silence.

Jeb let out a long sigh. "Shi…" he started, thought of Lizzy and said, "crap." He clicked his headset, "Captain?"

There was a static filled pause. The captain's voice was crisp and cold, "Report Mr. Lark." Jeb winced–he hated it when she called him mister.

He reported what had happened–how he was injured–and asked, oh how it hurt, for assistance.

There was another long pause, then the Captain said, "No."

The response wasn't exactly unexpected, but Jeb was still caught off guard. "What the f…freak do you mean, No?"

There was only a brief pause. "We're sealing you in. The infestation cannot be allowed to spread."

"Bullcrap. I'm injured and we don't dock for what? Two months? What the freaking-Hades will I eat?" Jeb took a deep breath, calming himself. "Just let me out then seal the lower deck."

The captain's voice–laced with a hint of hysteria–shot back. "Your job is to take care of these problems Mr. Lark, not create new problems with your incompetence! I have men

getting into place at every exit as we speak. I won't allow these…things to contaminate the rest of my ship."

Jeb felt white, hot anger shoot through him. "You little…" He checked himself–maybe that wasn't the way he needed to go. He played the sympathy card. It was his only chance. "So, you'll let me die?"

The static in the headset seemed to go on and on. Finally the captain's voice came back. Her tone was gentler than Jeb ever remembered. "Okay, Mr. Lark. We'll give you one hour to eradicate the infestation and get topside. I'll give the order to let you through."

Anger crept into her voice, "But you are being paid to do a job. So do it." She took a deep breath. "We have families, children up here–your child. If even one of those things gets topside…" She left the rest unsaid, but it was enough to shake Jeb to his core.

The captain was right. The snotty little English bi...ahhhhh. Being a good dad was hard work.

Jeb set his jaw. "Give me thirty minutes," he said. "And Captain?"

"Yes Mr. Lark?"

"Stop this boat and set decompression safeguards at ready. It's about to get messy."

The captain said a word, which Lizzy wouldn't approve of, in a high pitched wheeze. Jeb pulled the headset off, threw it in a corner, and climbed to his feet. He popped a fresh clip in his subgun, racked it, and let it hang by the harness as he slung his pack off. He unzipped the small bag and rummaged through the

contents. From the bottom he pulled out what he was looking for–illegal to own, especially dangerous aboard a starship, and just what the doctor ordered–a plasma grenade.

He unlocked the door and kicked it open for dramatic effect. The subgun blazed, and small, Chihuahua-sized bugs died. There were too many, of course, but the grenade would take care of that. He gripped the small explosive in his left hand, while the subgun barked in his right. He pulled the grenade's pin with his teeth, spitting the small metal ring onto the floor. He threw the grenade just as the subgun emptied. Then, he turned and ran as fast as he could.

The sliding and clicking of exoskeletons followed.

He made it to the stairs of the nearest emergency exit. A man–white faced and thin skinned–stood on the other side of the door, and stared at Jeb through the thick, glass window mounted in the hatch. The man's eyes widened in disbelief and shock as the whole ship shook with a deep thud-wup when the grenade exploded.

Jeb felt a momentary flash of heat on his back and a millisecond later the air in the hall became a living thing. It screamed in his ears, pulling and pushing him back the way he had come. The hull had been breached by superheated plasma, and the air in the hall tried to release itself into black space in one instantaneous moment.

Jeb acted instinctively. He leaned forward against the onslaught of air. His right hand gripped, and then slipped off the metal stairs. His left hand caught a hold as his feet came off the floor. Dust, moisture, and small bits of debris flew past him–

tiny bits of nothing that stung his flesh in a fury to release into the vacuum of space.

Jeb's right hand found the stairs and he glanced up at the man behind the glass. His face was locked in a mask of terror. Looking into the other man's eyes and seeing his ridiculous expression, Jeb couldn't help himself from laughing. His laughs were lost in the wind, and he choked on some small bit of jetsam, but he laughed anyway as pure joy overtook him. It was what he lived for, why he did what he did. No man has ever truly lived, unless he's faced death and spit in the motherfreaker's eye. The thin, pale-faced man watched, shaking his head in disbelief.

Jeb clawed his way up the stairs. His arms ached with the strain of pulling against the rush of wind, but he pulled– laughing, coughing, spitting, and not-quite-cursing the whole way. Metal step by metal step, Jeb pulled himself until he reached the landing.

He managed to lift himself up, grasping the door's wheel latch with both hands, and put his feet tenuously on the steel beneath him. He pressed his face awkwardly against the hatch's glass just as his feet slipped out from under him again. His legs dangled behind him, kicking against the wind like a man swimming against the tide.

With one eye pressed hard against the glass, Jeb stared into the face of the thin, pale-faced man. The man continued to shake his head–slower as he mouthed the word "No", over and over.

Jeb hooked his right arm through the wheel latch and with

his other hand he placed the subgun to the glass next to his face. Jeb smiled, feeling his upper lip slide up at an exaggerated angle, and spittle dribbled down his chin. The gun was empty–its clip exhausted from killing brain drillers–but the pale-faced man behind the glass saw a grinning, slobbering madman with at least one crazy, blue eye and a gun loaded with God-knew-what. The man swallowed hard, and after a minute, managed to open the door a crack.

Jeb was a fighter, a survivor, and a crack was all that he needed. He managed to stick his head and shoulders through the door. The man pulled him inside and the emergency door closed with a metallic click. The howling wind stopped.

Jeb lay on his back, struggling to breathe. He looked up at the ceiling, coughed, turned his head, and spat.

"Son-of-a–"

Jeb closed his eyes–thought of Lizzy safe, probably sleeping in their shared apartment somewhere above him–and smiled. Life was good.

Road Kill

By Mark Wolf

Sam cruised along the dark, desert, two-lane highway in his 51' Ford pickup. Tunes from his dated eight-track radio combo kept him company. He strained to reach the high notes of "Unchained Melody" that blared from the radio.

Struggling to stay awake, Sam shook his head and slapped himself in the face. Hot ashes from his cigarette scattered across his dark, camouflage jacket. He brushed them off, onto the floor.

Sam loved to road hunt late at night, with only Max–his Rhodesian-pit-bull cross–as his hunting companion.

It was no deterrent to him, that what he was doing was illegal. In fact it added a sweet savor to the thrill, at the risk of getting caught. Of course, any large game he managed to kill was also out-of-season.

He reached for the thermos between his legs, which warmed the inside of his camouflaged thighs, and popped the lid off.

Suddenly the truck slammed into something and sprang into the air–a spray of red blood misted his windshield, and hot coffee scalded his crotch.

"Shit!"

Sam's heart pounded, and his cigarette fell unnoticed from his lips.

Would it be something he could add to the freezer back at the trailer? Whatever it was, it bled a lot.

It'd felt bigger than a javelina or raccoon. Maybe a deer?

Sam brought the truck to a stop and shifted the four-speed into reverse. He backed up as Max–still in the pickup's bed–barked and strained against his chain. Several yards behind him, a dark shape dragged itself off the road and into the vegetation–much bigger than a javelina.

The full moon and his small, reverse lights illuminated the saguaro cacti and sagebrush on both sides of the sand-dusted road. Straining his eyes, he wondered if it could be a bear. If so, he would need to be damn careful.

Sam caught sight of the creature as it passed through an opening. For a moment the dark image appeared to run upright on two legs as it traversed through the scattered shrubbery.

Sam shook his head. Bears are pretty rare in these parts. I'm seeing things.

The creature went over a small-cut bank and disappeared from view, screeching in pain as its leg dragged behind.

Sam stopped the truck on the side of the road and pulled his Winchester from the gun rack, then grabbed his Maglite off the seat.

He quickly chambered a round, and then turned towards the creature's screeching while it moved through the brush, flashes of red blood and dark fur.

The desert stretched flat in either direction, without the sign of another headlight.

Sam figured he could finish off the deer or bear, get it

gutted out, pulled onto the bed of the pick-up, and covered with a tarp. He'd have it home, cut up, and in the freezer before anyone had the chance to catch him with the out-of-season game.

On the other hand, a wounded deer or bear was damn dangerous. If he got in over his head, he didn't have any backup. He hesitated, then reached over and unhooked Max. Max had hunted javelinas and deer, and knew to keep his distance.

Max leaped from the truck and tore off after the creature.

Catching up to the creature quickly, Max's teeth snapped, bellowing a challenge. Sam was startled by an entirely new sound he had never heard before–a high pitched keening and clicking.

What the hell? "Get him, boy! Get him, Max!"

Sam slipped through the last of the heavy sagebrush and into an opening. His light flashed on a human-sized, reddish shape. The thing wasn't a bear, deer, or javelina. It was other, and it carried a mace.

Turning towards Sam, the creature–face bloody, eyes spotted like a spider's–seemed puzzled by the flashlight. The monster's mouth opened to reveal jagged teeth. It let out a screech that froze the blood in Sam's veins, and then it hobbled towards him, its broken leg dragging behind.

Sam quickly backed up, brought the rifle to his shoulder, and fired a shot–the bullet splatted and his flashlight showed a spurt of blood.

Sam chambered another round, crying out in fear. Urine

trickled down his leg.

The beast slowed momentarily, then screeched another challenge and redoubled its efforts. Max clamped down on its broken leg and shook his head, trying to hamstring it. The beast swung at Max. The dog's yelp was cut off as he went flying from the impact.

The thing screeched again and grinned at Sam–drool splashed from its mouth. Its horrible eyes glowed unearthly purplish-green in Sam's reflected flashlight beam.

On Sam's next shot a chunk of fur and blood spurted from the beast's shoulder.

Sam almost jammed the gun in his hurry to eject the cartridge from the rifle's misfire.

The beast moved much quicker than Sam would have thought possible.

He was able to get one more shot off before the thing hit him on the head with its weapon, stunning him.

The last thing Sam saw was a mouth, full of teeth, rushing towards his face.

Dirnak held the head of the Earthling up for the rest of the hunting party to admire. The Dwenorians gathered around him, screeching and clacking, congratulating him on his kill.

Dirnak's minor wounds had been quickly treated in the hunting ship's auto-doc.

The body meat of the Earthling was, in turn, quickly cut up and flash-frozen before it could spoil, as was its hunting companion's.

He planned on mounting the head on the wall of his hunting cabin in Dwenor, beside more from this planet and others–which he'd taken over several years of hunting wild areas and lonely stretches, during their planetary travels.

The paths the Earthlings called highways, or roads, were always fantastic places to hunt.

The Blues

By Shawn Cook

Carson looks in my direction and points at me with the barrel of his rifle. Shit, I think. We lock eyes and he nods towards the town in the distance. Looking at the other refugees, I notice that not one of them will meet my eyes. I sigh heavily and move closer to the truck.

"Something you want to say smart-ass?" Carson says.

I bite back the words I'd love to say, shake my head, and drop my pack to the ground. Another soldier tosses me a rucksack that is twice the size of my ratty backpack and I wonder for the thousandth time why I ever bothered to be "rescued". Lackler hands me my hunting knife and I clip it to my belt.

"You know what to look for," Carson says. "Get goin'."

I pull the pack onto my shoulders and start across the barren bean field towards town. I can feel eyes on me, crawling across my body. The soldiers, the other refugees; I can almost feel the barrels of the rifles drilling into my back. Turning around to look back, I can see Carson sitting on top of the troop carrier as it idles on the deserted country road. He's made himself a nice little chair out of the meager food supplies we have, he perches there like a king on his throne.

Lackler and Donovan sit at his feet, rifles pointed at me.

Carson has told them to shoot me if I try to run; these are wasted words, though. We all know the drill. Fillmore sits behind the driver's seat, a cigarette crammed in his fat lipped mouth, while Martinez nods in the passenger's seat, high again. I glance at Shear; his head darts like a bird, his dark eyes never stop under the worn boonie hat. He stands next to the refugees, not as a guard, where would any of us go? We'd never survive on our own. But he stands there, scanning, his sniper rifle held loosely in his hands.

Shear is the only one of the soldiers who treats any of us decently, and the one thing that keeps the other soldiers from ripping us apart. He's not overly friendly, but we don't worry about him hitting us or using us as target practice. Carson and the other soldiers are scared of Shear, but they need him and his deadly accuracy, so they ignore him whenever they can.

Carson knows he's as good as dead without the quiet sniper; none of the others are as good at killing Blues as Shear. That's why they don't fuck with him. Well, that and what Shear did to Captain Kellor after he tried to rape one of the women in the group. After Kellor it was an undeclared rule, the refugees belong to Shear.

It doesn't stop Carson and his minions from using us as human shields, though. That's why we walk while they ride. If an attack comes, the soldiers either pick the bastards off while they rip us to shreds or haul ass while the Blues feast. Fourteen of us would feed the Blues well. In turn, Carson supplies us grudgingly and only with what we find in the towns.

That's what they keep me for. I've gotten good at

scavenging and I can get in and out of places pretty quick. My belligerent attitude has earned me the top spot on Carson's shit-list, but Carson tolerates me because I'm good at what I do. It doesn't stop me from the occasional "accident" while Shear isn't around, but they never break any bones or leave any visible bruises. At least Shear will cover me as I walk across the field and I can count on him making my death quick if I get caught. I focus my attention back on the town.

Coming in from across the small bean field I never catch the name of the place. To me it's nothing more than another small town on the edge of nowhere. I cross the overgrown lawn of a green house and step onto the sidewalk. Most buildings have been burned or looted and a few sit whole but lifeless. Abandoned cars sit in lonely drive ways or in front of houses here and there. Litter and overgrown weeds choke the yards while busted windows stare blankly. I'd guess a population of four hundred people used to live here. I notice a broken tricycle and hope that they all headed north to the colder climate where it's a little safer.

I notice a white-grey pile and my heart sinks a little. Kneeling down I notice the bones have been broken and chewed upon. Judging from the teeth marks I'd have to say it wasn't an animal. It was a Blue. I glance around warily and pull my knife from its sheath. I had hoped we were far enough to the north to avoid them.

I've got to be extra quiet. The idea of being set upon by those long vicious teeth and black claws is enough to make me want to run, hide. I grip the hilt tightly and calm myself; I've

got a job to do. I stand slowly and make my way towards the nearest store, a partially burnt Mom and Pop; I pass more bones on the way.

Broken glass crunches under my feet and I swear to God it's the loudest sound I've ever heard. In the distance, I can feel more than hear, the slow rumble of the troop carrier. I sniff the air, expectantly. Blues have a distinct chemical odor about them, a smell of sharp needles and old cinnamon, but even though I smell nothing I don't relax.

The store sits on a corner, its blackened windows looking like the sockets of a skull. Charred gas pumps stand sentinel over a blackened skeleton and two burned out cars. Bubbled and cracked paint above the eaves proclaim this to be the Harlan General Store. Harlan. That's the name of the town. I absently wonder what state I'm in.

The store is small, with only four aisles and two busted dairy cases that sit in the back of the store. The roof is partially collapsed towards the back and I cover my nose from the smell of rotting food while picking cautiously through the debris. In one aisle I find three cans without labels; the rest is either heat or weather damaged. I place the cans into the pack and walk towards the back of the store.

The dairy cases are a mess. One is filled with charred shelving and broken glass. The other sits empty and I can make out a vague impression of the storeroom through the opaque glass. The partially collapsed roof has blocked the double doors leading to the back. I decide that the roof is too unstable to risk it. No sense getting crushed or trapped for a room that's

probably full of charred dog food.

It looks like I'll be going house to house, which is not something I'm looking forward to. I make my way towards the front of the store when I catch movement in a derelict house across the street. I drop into a crouch and remain motionless, knife ready at my side.

Blues have weak sight in the daytime but I'm not taking any chances. I slowly begin to back towards the rear of the shop. I can possibly crawl through the dairy cases and get into the back; maybe find a loading dock or back door. My eyes haven't moved from the house. My ass bumps into the case and I lever my fingers under the magnetic seal to open the door. The subtle shick of the door opening is barely audible. I pull the door and slowly turn to crawl inside.

I close the door behind me and peer into the darkness. I can barely make out white sheets and the occasional lump of large crates. As my eyes adjust to the weak light I begin to shake and my breath leaves my chest. What I had initially mistaken for white sheets is actually webbing, layer upon layer of webbing. My foot rests inches from the webs that connect to the back of the separating wall between storeroom and the store proper.

My eyes dart over every square inch of the room I can see, as I remain dead still. The web terminates into a funnel in the upper right of the ruined ceiling. Tears run freely down my face as the web vibrates delicately, its master emerges slowly. Long spindly legs appear first, miles and miles of legs. Then the head begins to come into the light and I lose control of my bladder.

As a child, spiders instilled a terror in me that is rivaled by

nothing else and I've never lost that fear. Spiders are, to me anyway, the embodiment of blank insanity and irrational hunger.

It slowly emerges from its lair and I'm fucking frozen. I pray silently that God will grant me a heart-attack. "Please," I beg inside my head. Dimly, I hear a shifting sound and contemplate cutting my own throat. I'm positive any movement will launch the spider into me and I'm afraid that I won't bleed to death fast enough.

I scream as glass shatters around my head and I'm suddenly pulled backward through the dairy case door. I land roughly on my back halfway down the aisle, losing the knife in the process. My mind is a screaming blank as I expect fangs and legs. Opening my eyes I see my savior, a Blue. The bastard from across the street had come to investigate.

It stands there for a few seconds and I realize it's hoping I'll run, hoping to make sport out of me. It towers over me and I realize I'd never seen one this close before. It's close to seven feet tall, thin with wiry muscles, hairless light blue skin, and lidless blue-black eyes. A rudimentary nose and thin lips frame needle teeth that jut from a large jaw, while long black talons tick together at the ends of fingers. Rags cover its barefoot frame, dirty and bloodstained. It begins to crouch slowly, coiling like an Olympic diver, and I have seconds to live.

A low, slow purr flutters through the air and long legs emerge from the hole in the back of the dairy case. My mind can barely register the implications; the Blue launches itself towards me and all I can see is teeth and talon.

The impact never comes and I stare up blankly as a mass of blue and dark mottled brown soar over my prone form and crash through what remains of the storefront and into the street. The spider had attacked the closest moving thing and in turn saved my life. I hear screeches from the Blue and I vault to my feet, heading for the nearest opening.

I streak out of the building and race as fast as I can down the street. I catch a glimpse of a rolling brown body coiled around a struggling blue form. My boots slap against the pavement as I run, ringing out in the stillness, and something moves from under the porch of an old brick house. I run harder.

I round the corner of the green house and something crashes into bushes that line the yard missing me by inches. My legs are burning and my adrenaline is starting to ebb. Across the field I can see the troop carrier and I think that I've almost made it, when I'm tackled from behind.

My face is pushed into the earth and my mouth fills with dirt. I'm rolled onto my back as a great weight settles onto my chest and legs. I stare in horror as a different Blue lowers it face to mine and stops an inch from touching. Claws frame my head as I stare into those horrid lifeless eyes. Its depthless black orbs are all I can see and I feel my body start to go numb. I can feel an odd probing inside my head and the world……

The Masters are calling and he emerges from his burrow into the upperland. He snatches a hive rat at the mouth of the cave and begins to feed on it, while making his way towards the summoning. Warm blood runs freely down his neck as he rips and chews. Above, the dark purple sky is the color of abused

flesh and faint luminescent tracers glint here and there on the horizon. More of them are crawling out of the ground now. Here they are not the Blues, but the Children.

He passes through the ruins of a city, crumbling walls and twisted steel lit occasionally by blood red lightning. Odd shapes adorn one large wall and he knows instinctively they mean something. C-H-I-C-A-G-O, they whisper in his mind. He snarls and spits, cursing the tongue of the Grandfathers. He makes his way past the remains of a dead web-walker the size of four fully grown Children, past a large bowl-like structure that once housed the games the Grandfathers played. He walks on, joined by small and then large groups of Children–a tense meeting of tribes–their wars of survival forgotten at the behest of the Masters. He turns a corner and joins a mass of bodies that stand under the God-wall. There are league upon league of his brothers and sisters, their bodies reflecting the glow of the wall. Instantly, one of the Masters appears, his head and shoulders blotting the sky.

The lower half of the Master's face is covered in a breathing mask and his glow-worm colored skin has a sheen of sweat to it. In the background, more of the Masters can be seen in front of a wall covered in blinking lights and tubing. The Master begins to speak and the Blues understand little. The Master says the words "rift" and "portal" as the world around them starts to hum. "Reckoning" and "Revenge" as levers are pulled and the sky above the Children crackles with white lightning.

Revenge is all the Children need to know. Revenge on the Grandfathers who created this world of pain and hate. Revenge

on those who created wars that twisted the bodies of their children's children. A reckoning for the wars the Masters call "Chemkill".

Below the God-wall a blazing white light begins to form from a pinprick. In seconds it's the size of the God-wall itself.

"*Go!*" The Master screams. "Show them what they have done! Make them suffer! Take the poisoned blood of our world into theirs!"

The Children boil into the opening and disappear.

I slam back into my own head. Before I can fully comprehend what I was shown the Blue–the Child–begins to run two talons slowly down my face. The pain is intense and I scream as he makes his way slowly towards my eyes. I know what he's doing and I try to thrash, to dislodge the bastard.

I've found uneaten bodies before and they all had empty sockets; I never bothered to figure out why. I can feel the skin on my forehead split slowly and I hear a low huffing noise that passes for laughter. A fleeting thought ghosts through my mind.

"Their world is the last thing they want you to see."

The talons reach just above my eyebrows when the Child's head shatters in a backwards spray. His weight rolls off of me and I gasp as I climb unsteadily to my feet. My head pounds and I half-run, half-stagger towards the troop carrier. Shear is standing next to the front driver-side wheel and the smoking barrel confirms it was he who saved me.

"Where's the fucking pack, asshole?" Carson says.

I notice it's just Carson in the back, Martinez and Fillmore in the cab.

"The pack! Where's the fucking pack?" I look at him blankly; I hadn't realized that I had lost the damn thing. I wipe blood out of my eyes.

"Where are Lackler and Donovan?" I ask.

"They went looking for your sorry ass. Fuck. What good are you?" Rising from his throne in the back of the truck, he lowers the gun to my head.

I don't flinch at all when the gun goes off, but I stare with wide eyes as Carson's head evaporates into mist. Shear lowers his weapon and opens the driver's side door. Martinez's dead body falls to the ground heavily, a screwdriver jammed into his ear. Fillmore is dead as well; a small bladed knife juts from one eye.

"Get in," Shear says to me and walks towards the rest of the refugees, who have started climbing into the back of the truck.

He tosses me Carson's rifle and boot-knife and I wonder how long this has been planned. Part of me is pissed–off at being kept out of the loop, but deep down I understand. I could never have waited for the right time to act, and Carson paid too much attention to what I was doing for me to have hidden anything.

I pull a field dressing out of Carson's pack and apply the bandage, and then yank Fillmore out of the cab and climb in. Shear slides behind the wheel and starts the truck. As we pull away from the bodies I see Lackler, running across the field being chased by two Children.

I look at Shear, who stares straight ahead and pulls us back

onto the country road. He glances at me with a slight grin and removes his boonie hat. I see two long vertical scars that make their way from his hair-line to just above his eyes.

Sector C

By D.G. Sutter and T. Patrick Rooney

He took a deep breath and fingered the plaid pillowcase. The sound of his finger rustling the fabric seemed loud enough to raise the dead, let alone Leah. She slept like a rock next to him, her intake loud but sweet. Brendan could even smell her breath–not terrible, just a trifle ripe.

When he flipped to wrap his arm over her breasts, she shifted underneath the comforter. He envied her ability to sleep on a whim, for he didn't possess the quality. Going to bed meant losing precious moments in life, moments he wanted to cherish. Although, what finally brought on his drowsiness was the weighted argument that losing sleep meant shortening your overall lifespan.

He started to drift off, finally finding a spot where his body could really sink into the mattress. It was short lived. Outside the bedroom window a beacon of light originated. Leah mumbled and weakly pulled a pillow over her head. "Brendan, turn the television off."

Brendan climbed out of bed and tiptoed toward the window. Through the sheer curtain of cotton he could see something floating there, but before he could pull it aside to see what was waiting, the window smashed in. Glass spattered over

the bed, tinkering off the body-length mirror on the closet.

He turned to run, but the mechanical arm was fast. It gripped him around the torso, three curved prongs clamping down like massive leather belts, covered with wiring and buttons. His stomach was pierced and penetrated. Something moved around inside of his body. He could actually feel it crawling down into his loins.

Brendan was yanked back through the window, glass slicing through his skin on the retreat. Already the sedatives were taking their toll–blurring his vision and weakening muscle reactions.

Leah was screaming in bed, but that sight was quickly vanquished when Brendan was yanked through a circular hole. Upon passing, a lid closed over the gap and a dial cranked metallically. The human world disappeared with a slam of solid finality.

The arm carried Brendan through a corridor of dark black metal, over crates of an alloy similar to the walls. When it stopped, the arm released Brendan into an open container. He could feel the prongs sliding free of his stomach and he could see silver wires retract into the arm.

He looked down at his stomach. A small creature spilled out of the wound. It spoke monotonously. “MALE. ACID LEVELS LOW. HEALTHY. DEPORT TO SECTOR C.”

On the side of the metallic arm a compartment was revealed. The creature climbed inside and the hole closed. The arm fell over Brendan, shutting the lid to the metal crate.

The sides of the box were cold against Brendan’s body. He

sat with his knees against his chest, in his boxers. There was no room to move, no room to stretch his legs. He remembered nodding in and out of consciousness, and being only vaguely aware of the inhuman screams and banging of fists on metal.

Drayton Day was having a good morning. He had a full thermos unit of coffee–just a sip of the helmet straw away–and he was out destroying an asteroid with a mining laser. Around him the chaos of the asteroid belt roiled with laser blasts from the other miners and cargo shuttles zipping back and forth on thruster power.

Way out here in the belt, the sun is miniscule in the distance and there's not much heat at all. The stars around them, however, are a wondrous thing indeed–a glistening blanket from one end of his visor to the other. Everywhere he looks, the majesty of space surrounds him with the speckled glory of billions upon billions of distant stars, shining like the beacons of heaven.

Needless to say, Drayton loved the stars and loved his job, too. He loved to cut the rocks out here and daydream about what may be out there, and who might be looking up at those same stars and wondering about him. The mining rig that Drayton is attached to has its own little thrusters and robot control to keep it hovering just behind him, no matter where he goes in the belt.

Hunks of rock are cut away, and grabbed by the pincers at the end of the mining rig's radial arms. The multi-jointed arms take the pieces and put them into its processor basket. Once the

basket is full, the robot would kick on the grinder and reduce the rocks to sand. The sand passes under a magnetic wand as it falls from the back of the processor, and all of the precious metals are separated into a hamper. The metal is weighed at the end of the day and Drayton is paid a per kilogram rate.

Taking a sip of the gloriously dark-roasted coffee, Drayton slashes another rock away from the asteroid. As the robot arm grabs it, a chunk of metal is revealed. He smiles and aims the laser at the rock around the metal and his eyes glitter at the thoughts of a bonus day coming his way. The laser starts to trace the edges of the metal formation and Drayton begins to wonder just how big it could be. The area of the metal surface is huge–about two meters across–and once he finishes cutting around it, he pushes off a bit to look at it all at once.

When he is a couple of meters away from the thing and can take it all in (at first just based on the sheer size of the thing), he is very excited because that much metal will get him a bonus equivalent to a couple of months' salary. Then, he looks at it again and slaps the panic button on the drilling harness of his space suit–the yellow button with the big, red 'X' on it that signals an emergency. The klaxon starts buzzing. Shuttles and other miners hurry over to where Drayton hovers, looking at the mass of metal before him–his eyes are bulging from his head, his mouth agape, and no words coming out. He had waited his whole life to meet an alien or find the proof that they, at least, existed. He had fallen in love with the idea of aliens and knew in his heart-of-hearts that they were real, and here–finally, on a random Thursday at work–he found them.

It's not so much a mass of metal in the side of an asteroid, as it is a valve-door to a ship, embedded in the rock itself. A ship the likes of which none of the people suddenly crowding around him had ever seen before. The metal ring around the door is carved with deep-cut sigils and lines, an alien language of some sort. The men can only stare at it in awe, as the full realization strikes them, as it had Drayton. It is real. They are not alone in the universe and for the first time in human history they had concrete, irrefutable proof of it.

As the effects of the sedative wore off, Brendan could feel the aftermath in his joints. His knees, ankles, and elbows felt full of liquid and pressurized. In college he had dabbled in recreational drugs and knew the ache of a high, long gone. It was the brain's defense against the drug, and also its craving. Brendan wasn't sure what he'd been doped with, but he wanted more.

His skin was moist with sweat and he could feel the unsure chill–a cold sweat on the arches of his feet. Brendan's heart was beating gently, vibrating off the walls of the crate. He opened his mouth to speak and his dry tongue peeled free from the roof of his mouth.

"Help," he said. "Help!" How long had he been out? How long since he'd spoken? It felt like weeks.

Just as his senses started to return, he realized the absence of vision. There was fabric draped over his eyes, covering both sockets. It wasn't pressed on, but it was stuck. He panicked. "Ugh…What the hell?"

Brendan lifted his hands to his face, groping for the fabric. Finally, his weak fingers ripped the patches off of his eyes. The stale air hit his eyeballs, making them cold despite the conflicting room temperature. It took a few moments for his eyes to fully open, and even longer to adjust to the lack of light. When finally they did, he could make out the cool contours of the box he was encased within–six sides of smooth, dark grey metal.

He tried to push the lid open, the same one he vaguely remembered cutting him off from the world. There was absolutely no give. Somewhere beyond the realm of his confinement a hum persisted, which suggested a running machine. To Brendan it sounded like the burn of a winter furnace. He wished the furnace was heating his crate, for he had started to shiver. It could have been from withdrawal of the sedative he'd been placed under, or the thought that he was aboard some alien vessel–being carted to who-knew-where for who-knew-what–had finally hit hard enough to make him question his mortality.

Somewhere beyond the vicinity of the transport he was on (feet, miles–hell, light years) his lovely wife was praying for him. He knew she would endlessly think of him, worrying until he returned home. Brendan pulled his knees to his chest and slid his palms down the hair of his legs, whilst tucking his head between his knees. He felt down the right leg, for it was tingling near his ankle. When his hand hit just above his foot, he recoiled in pain.

Something was penetrating his flesh. After touching the

entrance point, it had started to sting. Brendan wrapped his fingers around it and huffed in agony. Whatever it was, it was certainly jammed deep. To him it felt like an IV.

He yanked the intrusion out and liquid spurted over his legs. “Yow–aghh…!”

The liquid spilled until it reached his bottom and soaked his boxer shorts. It was warm and he was sure that at least some of it was blood. The rest he couldn’t be one-hundred percent on, but an educated guess suggested sustenance.

He had forgotten about the screams and pounding, but it came back all too real. They weren’t consistent noises, but rather, background tracks to the most horrible dream imaginable. In the back of his brain he could picture the screams and pleas of those captured men or women, and their families back home–possibly having witnessed the same horrific scene as Leah.

Hours passed sitting in that position, wondering where in the universe he was and how he would resist if–and hopefully when–the situation was presented. Occasionally, Brendan would think too deeply, panic, and nearly lash out at the walls, but he remembered it would bring about the same fruitless results. Nevertheless, his heart pounded and his breaths shortened. There was not anything he could do, but wait.

It was terrible having nothing to do and Brendan imagined how it would feel to be jailed, but mostly it reminded him of a beast in a zoo, without the spectators. He actually let out a small laugh thinking maybe, just maybe, his fate would be that of Horton. Maybe, he was being transported to the circus to

perform–hell, a small piece of optimism never hurt anyone.

What seemed like many hours later, the lid to the crate peeled off, accompanied with the sound of hydraulic air release. Brendan cowered in the crate. He had expected a bath of light to swathe him into submission, but no such luck. The impeding darkness was even flatter than inside the crate, and also showcased a cut-out of the mechanical arm.

It craned over the hole and Brendan had the oddest feeling that it was watching him, measuring his actions, trying to consider its offense. When it rendered Brendan harmless, the three fingered claw reached in and clenched around Brendan's torso.

The last thing he wanted was to be injected once more with the sedative. So, when the compartment opened and the small metal spider came crawling out, Brendan decisively slammed his fist onto the robotic thing. Sparks climbed up his arm and he screamed as the flesh of his right hand tensed and blackened. The move proved worthy and sparks and waves of electricity jumped over the hard, black metallic arm. It short-circuited and released Brendan, and then retracted from the crate and disappeared from view.

Brendan struggled to stand, ultimately falling back on his rump. He imagined it must be kind of what it's like for a calf after being caged up to be slaughtered for veal. His bearing came none too sooner, for as he pulled himself free of the crate, the mechanical arm dropped out of a panel near the ceiling.

It swiveled about, as if disoriented. Brendan took off down the corridor. His field of vision was obscured by veiling fuzz,

and shook as he ran, but out of his peripherals he could see more arms dropping out of numerous panels along the hard walls. His feet slapped on the hard frostbitten floor, and the only other sound as he carried on through the gauntlet of metal crates, was the hydraulic joints of the mechanical arms, flexing after him.

Brendan looked for an out. Ahead, there was a darkened doorway and he quickly turned into it, hoping that he could lose his predators. He squeezed into the very corner of the pitch black alcove and tucked his arms into his sides, making for a very convincing mannequin.

The corridor had since lit up with red lights. He felt like he was not only on the worst acid trip, but stuck at the scariest rave party the world had ever known. Through the haze of the wearing thin sedative, Brendan saw two metallic arms creep past the doorway. He breathed as quiet and still as possible.

They passed by, but he could still see the extension of the claw–or the arm–stretching past the boundary of the door. He wanted to collapse into the corner and weep. To his left was an electronic panel, glowing bright green letters and numbers. He thought of trying to breach the door, but thought that if he failed it would draw attention to his position. Besides, what lay beyond the threshold?

The arms began to return from whence they'd come. As they passed, Brendan held completely still, unblinkingly still. The arm on the right side vanished. The arm closer to the left side of the corridor–where Brendan was hiding–was still in sight when he accidentally flexed his fist open, and then quickly

closed.

As if sensing the small movement, the hand came closer, closer…right before his face. Brendan held his breath and clogged his nasal passage with the back of his tongue. Despite the subtle tingle of his nerves, his brain worked overtime to make sure not a muscle flinched, nor a vein throbbed. It was all he could do to allow his heart to beat.

Like a gift from God, the claw swayed into the corridor and shot out of sight. Brendan waited a few minutes before slowly letting the air slide between his pursed lips. He kept the release so weak that the heat rose upwards into his nostrils. Eventually, the red lights flicked back into stealth mode, and darkness was once more king.

Brendan reckoned it was time to move. It would do him no good sitting in the doorframe. He poked his head around the corner and glanced in both directions. From where he had come, the hallway curved out of sight. However, in the opposite direction Brendan could see something along the left wall that looked like the valve door through which he'd entered the ship. He started to tiptoe in that direction.

Much to his surprise the red warning lights did not flash on, and even in passing more of the metal crates, no mechanical arms dropped down to greet him. As he passed said crates, his conscience couldn't help but tease him to try and help the innocent inside. Though he wanted to, he knew it was probably a poor call, especially after noticing more drop-down panels lining the walls. He reached the door and strangely enough, it opened of its own volition.

Being selfish is easy to do, and Brendan knew this from experience. Leah sometimes told him he was too self-absorbed. He worked out in his mind what Leah would do in his situation. Looking into the fresh hallway, bathed in warm white light was very inviting, but Brendan had an inkling that she would try to help the captives in the crates. Then, he thought, why not do both? He could run, or he could build an army–no, a retaliation. As he turned his back, and turned heel, the valve slammed shut with a metal cranking.

When he came upon the first crate, he noticed something he hadn't at first–there were carvings in a strange language on the outside. He examined the box for a latch or button to open the lid. What he found looked like a miniature sundial crank. He spun the dial clockwise and it clicked like a music box. There was a release of air and the lid swung open.

Brendan nearly jumped back at the sight. He had expected a drowsy man or sobbing woman, but what was inside the box was no earthen being. The otherworldly creature was stumpier than a human, with wide shoulders and a thick body. Its nose spread broadly over a strong-jawed face, eyes set closer to the ears–like a fish. The look Brendan received in return was one of puzzled inebriation.

The thing–which was similar in skin tone to a human, just a tad more yellow–opened a mouth formed by two ultra-thin lips to speak. Brendan couldn't tear his gaze away from the rows of tiny teeth, rounded like little upside-down tombstones.

"Zjo-isk?" When he spoke (Brendan knew the sex of the thing after noticing the leathery male appendage between its

legs) its gums smacked together.

"What?" he asked.

"Zjo-isk! Zjo-isk!"

Brendan took a step away from the huddled man-beast, for his brow had furrowed. "Calm down…it's okay. We're gonna' get out of here. Just help me out." He tried to keep his voice down, but the creature wouldn't mimic.

It clambered free of the crate, slouched in a seemingly natural form, and slowly grabbed at Brendan's shoulder. His reflexes were much faster, and he took another step backwards.

"Seriously, I saw another room. Maybe we can get out of here. Do you understand?"

The creature snorted and let out a call somewhere between a goat and a horse. It didn't sound friendly. All of a sudden, the red lights flashed on. Brendan looked up and saw the panels start to drop open. "Oh, shit…"

Two strong hands clamped around his neck and he fell onto his back, taking the brunt of the fall. He could feel his throat collapsing and snow started to fill his vision. The angry creature's face hovered just above his own, and he could feel its breath on his face, smell it–like dog shit on fresh cut grass.

Over the attackers shoulder Brendan glimpsed one of the metallic arms, slithering lower towards the wrestling pair. He fought with the creature's grip for he knew what was going to happen. Just before the creature was gripped and torn off, Brendan managed to slide his hands under the tight constrict of his opposition. Struggling to his knees, he clutched his ailing neck. It still felt like a vice grip was fastened around the part,

but he knew there was no time to procrastinate. Before bolting, Brendan witnessed the creature dropped limply into its crate and the lid closed atop. So much for retaliation.

At the valve door Brendan slapped his hand on the blockage, telling it to hurry up and open. He hadn't the courage to check over his shoulder. It was a sigh of relief when he was on the other side and the arms were merely an afterthought.

He ran up the sloping passageway, which eventually straightened out. It was a welcome feeling to not see any drop-down paneling or mechanical arms shooting out at him. The corridor ended in yet another valve door. When it opened, Brendan was hit with a marvel indescribable.

The floor of the room seemed to fall away, like the bottom of a glass-floored boat, and beneath the paneling was the most glorious solar system. Hundreds of planets floated about, and in the distance was a red sun. He knew it was both a privilege and a curse. It was a sight very few would ever behold, but also came at a dear cost.

Above the floor floated a three-tiered platform. He couldn't see onto any of the levels, but figured it must be the control center. Various electronic noises fell off the sides of the stack, and wires hung haphazardly from the edges like snakes. He wasn't prepared for the appendages when two arms extended from the deck of the second platform. Brendan attempted to back up to the entrance but tripped over his own foot in his haste. Both arms wrapped around his body–one around his knees and thighs, the other around his upper body. It was like they knew his spider-crushing trick, because the upper arm

made sure to clamp over his biceps and dig into his back.

They raised him into the air like an action figure, until he was head first above the top of the structure. On the very height was an oddity, if Brendan could ever use the word. In the middle of the circular platform sat a creature of ghastly proportions. Its bottom half looked like it had been fitted into the console of a cockpit, and while the upper body was wholly intact, the humanoid's head was exposed to the very brain. Jutting out of the thinking machine's brain–which was what had truly been created–were wires, hardwired directly into the tissue.

The things eyes were closed, but when it opened them Brendan could see the electricity swimming in the machine's irises. With such a weak stream, the humanoid had become a perfect conductor.

[{(<…Earthling…>)}]

Brendan lost his breath and cringed as he felt the prongs slide not only into his stomach, but his legs. His thoughts started to halt abruptly.

[{(<…Induced…Return slave to Sector C…>)}]

He started to feel drowsy. Brendan wanted to lash out at the purple being, kill it for putting him through the experience. The hardened creature in the grey armor stared into Brendan's eyes. He knew then that the creature–which had once been an innocent inhabitant on a distant planet from Earth–was referred to as the Taskmaster. The words spoken had been transmitted telepathically, not aloud, along with the tad of mystifying information regarding his title. Everything was out of his hands.

Brendan felt that he could almost see the soul of the creature inside, banging on the eyelids of the Taskmaster to be released. He felt bad for the thing turned machine. At least Brendan knew his fate was to either escape or be held captive for the remainder of his life. The thing attached to the wires and devices was not really alive, it just was.

He started to nod off and the arm holding his legs released him. One of the metal spiders climbed free of the arm around his chest. It skittered up his breastbone and stuck a needle into his neck.

"HOMEOSTASIS--FAILING--URGENT," it said in that monotonous tone.

Brendan's thought process nearly halted–he could feel death's hand around him. The other arm dropped him onto the platform in a pile of flesh and bones. Another needle punctured his chest and it was like an orgasm. His body convulsed and he jumped awake, sitting upright–still alive. Connected from the Taskmaster's brain into Brendan's chest–where his heart would be–was a long silver, serrated cord. He could feel his heart hammering and knew from a past allergic reaction that he'd been injected with adrenaline. He felt strong, he felt superhuman.

[{(<…Revived…>)}] The Taskmaster announced in a wave of telepathy.

When he tried to stand the mechanical arm returned and wrapped around his waist. The attacker had made a miscalculation. Brendan swung his closed left fist onto the top of the Taskmaster's exposed brain, spewing tissue and blood, and additionally charring Brendan's healthy arm.

Through his veil of drugs–and near death experience–he managed to slur, "Fuck you, Taskmaster."

The brain response to Brendan's attack was delayed, but when it communicated, the arm squeezed tighter around his waist. His intestines, skin, and bones were squished between the mechanical fingers, looking much like ground beef. He fell through the air in excruciating pain. When he landed, he could see the bottom half of his body lying twenty feet away, glowing from the warm light of the distant red sun.

A massive troop transport slides smoothly into view and smashes aside the smaller spinning asteroids around it with its rippling phase-shields. It stops beside the gathered members of the Theta-Shift work crew and disgorges hundreds of Astro-Marines in their power-armor suits.

Drayton is still hovering there, unmoving. It has been over a half-hour since he paused to look at the thing, and even now, he's still staring in wonder at the sight before him. An insistent klaxon, ringing in his ears, alerts him that someone is sending him a message. He slowly reaches his right hand over to the metal strip on the left wrist of his suit and presses the com-link button.

"Drayton Day, your supervisor has told me that you discovered this alien artifact. My name is Captain Leonard Grymvyr and it would be an honor if you would accompany the First-Zed-Alpha squad of the Marines and me, inside to explore your find."

"Yes... Please... I... I have dreamed of this day my whole

life...” Drayton mumbles in response.

There are two Marines in power-armor nearby–they gesture him forward and then drift apart as he approaches on his attitude thrusters, revealing a tiny jet-sled with a pack on it. The two men unhook his drilling harness from his suit and strap a pack on his back. They give him a gun with a thick cable hooked into the side, which leads to the pack.

“This laser works just like your drill cutter–just point and shoot. If you see anything moving in there, or if things get hostile, you just fire this thing to cover your retreat and back out of there as fast as you can. Stay with us at all times, and if you get separated–you let us know immediately,” he is told.

“Sounds good,” he says in a tiny awe-stricken voice.

There are hundreds of men with drilling harnesses on, now cutting the rock completely away from the ship. After another hour they are done and the full ship is revealed. It is an elongated, tube-like shape ending in a rounded area that looks like a hand grasping a sphere. A line of deadly looking, cannon-like portals run along each side and length-wise down the tubular section. On the top of the sphere, several of the fingers have sets of fin-like projections the Marines mark in the heads-up display as “Sensors: UNKNOWN”. Along the tube are several hundred lines of the odd symbols engraved in the metal, like those surrounding the iris-like, valve-door which Drayton had originally found.

There are pipes and tubes running back and forth along the oddly shaped ship, and on the bottom are several ports which are labeled in the heads-up display as possible launching points for

shuttles or life-boats, or perhaps even missiles. At this point they don't know what any of the things they see are, at all; their functions are completely alien and the humans can only guess at them. All they can do is to try analyzing and studying intently, in the hopes of someday understanding the ships original functions. The heads-up display is now updated with dimensions, as well–the ship is two hundred and ninety-eight meters long, the tube section is thirty-two meters tall, and the sphere is eighty-four meters in diameter.

Drayton is in pure-ecstasy–his eyes glisten with tears of joy–and he's now come to the end of his greatest possible dream. For him this is the penultimate fantasy, the thing he has waited his whole life for; the only thing left he has ever wanted–in the entire universe–is to meet whoever made this ship.

The Marines motion Drayton forward once more, to the valve-door he found. They have rigged some sort of device up to the electronic panel near the door, which they hand to Drayton.

"Press the blue button and the door should open, Mr. Day…and we can proceed inside," Captain Grymvyr says.

Drayton looks down at the device, after glancing nervously around at all of the waiting faces staring at him. There is a huge blue button on top of the box they've given him. He mashes it down with his thumb and there is a vibration that runs through the box, as the button lights up with a bright blue glow. Looking up quickly, he watches in astonishment as the iris-shaped valve spreads open. Separate segments retract into the hull around the

door ring, until the ring is empty, and there before them is a gaping black hole–leading into the darkened ship.

The two Marines storm inside. The multiple lights on their gear point in various directions and illuminate the passageway beyond the door. It's a slightly curved tube leading to another valve-door at the opposite end.

"This is FZA-One…we are at the further aperture, advise when clear of primary," a voice says in the headset.

Drayton is ushered inside the passageway and two more Marines maneuver in behind him, along with the Captain. They float all the way to the group which is bunched up before the inner door.

"FZA-One you are advised all clear of primary aperture," another voice says.

"Roger that, initiated sequence," the first voice replies.

One of the power-armored Marines approaches the inner door and manipulates the box beside it. After several seconds, he flicks a switch and there's a metallic booming noise from behind them.

"FZA-One, be advised that the primary has closed behind you," a voice says.

"Roger that, must be some sort of safety function, and I guess this tube acts as an air-lock when the ship is up and running. We are opening inner door now," the Marine says.

Another flick of the switch on his wired-in box, and the inner door slides smoothly open. As it does, a vibration passes through the entire ship and several grinding noises are heard, as if metal is being rubbed across metal in a manner ferocious to

the human ear. In the lights of the power-armored Marines, Drayton can see the corridor beyond the inner door. It extends to the left, and then to the right, and it's lined along both sides by huge metallic boxes of some sort, above each of which is a panel in the wall of the corridor. Above the panels, on the ceiling, a recessed light turns on. It is dim, but in each direction more lights turn on, until the corridor is lit by the grim illumination.

"We must have activated some sort of automated system– stay alert everyone," Captain Grymvyr says.

"Look sir," one of the Marines says, pointing with his assault rifle into one of the partially open crates on the left side of the hall.

The Captain uses his power-armor's thrusters to maneuver himself to the crate and he looks inside of it. Stuck to the inside of the crate, by its own flash-frozen remains, is what looks like the dried-out skeleton of a man.

"Safeties off, and be ready for anything. That looks enough like a man to me, and if whatever put him in there is still around, I want to make sure we don't join him," Leonard says in a gruff voice.

"It doesn't look like a man to me at all–his skull is a bit too big and his shoulders are a bit too wide," Drayton says hovering over the open crate, gazing down inside.

He reaches out his hand and touches the skull with his gloved fingers.

"No, stop you fool, don't touch anything," the Captain yells.

The warm white lights above turn instantly to red, and a series of panels begin to shift in the ceiling above them. The panels slide to the side, revealing a dark space above them. A mechanical arm unfolds from each opening. Instantly, two of the multi-jointed arms grab up two of the power-armored Marines, and three prongs slide outward and clamp down on them. They scream as they're lifted toward the ceiling and blood begins to drip in vivid globules from under the cross-wired and deadly prongs. The two soldiers vanish into the ceiling and the panels slide back in place, blocking them from view.

A slamming sound stops the Captain and his last two men from exiting the ship, as a solid blast door slides down at the edge of the corridor, between them and their only escape. Drayton screams as he sees the arms grab the Marines. Using his thrusters, he sends himself flying down the corridor, away from the rest of the squad. He gets up near the ceiling and whisks along, dodging right and left as the various arms reach for him along the way. Behind him the Marines open fire on their mechanical assailants.

"Drayton get back here, don't leave the group," the Captain yells into his headset.

Drayton continues flying away from them–heedless of the warnings–and comes to a narrow door on the right side of the corridor. As he glides down towards it, the portal opens and he vanishes within.

"After him, men, it may be our only chance," the Captain says, as he fires off a forty-millimeter grenade at one of the

arms.

The resulting explosion knocks all of them backwards, but leaves the lower part of the arm dangling by several scorched and electrically shorting-out wires. The men take up the idea immediately and wreck the rest of the arms shooting toward where Drayton had disappeared. The Captain signals his men to move towards the door, keeping a distance. As they pass on either side of the first arm– which is still shorting-out with electrical zapping noises–the upper arm smashes out, crushing the helmet of one of the Marines. He doesn't even have time to scream as his brains splatter outward, filling the inside of his crushed helmet with gore.

The one remaining soldier fires at the partially torn part of the arm, which retracts into the ceiling and the panel slides closed. They continue firing at the remaining dangling arms, until they all retract. The Captain signals and the remaining Marine floats down the hallway ahead of him, towards the door in the distance.

The door seals behind Drayton and he breathes a sigh of relief. He finds himself in a narrow, well-lit passageway that rises like a ramp, and then continues straight with no doors or breaks in the ceiling at all. He follows it ever onward, his pulse racing with terror and his breathing loud in his ears. His eyes leap from wall to wall, to ceiling and back again, over and over, expecting the mechanical arms to lash out and grab him any second. His most precious life-long dream has become a living nightmare. His hands are shaking as he floats along as fast as he

can, with his heart hammering like thunder in his chest, so loudly he is sure they can hear it on the Titan-Station.

From behind him, Drayton hears the metallic-thunking sound of a door opening. Tears pour from his eyes as he speeds down the corridor. Finally, in the distance he can see something, which resolves into another valve-door the closer he gets. He flies in front of it and risks a glance back the way he has come. Seeing nothing, he darts inside when the door opens. He's just barely inside when the door slams shut. He turns and looks at the room around him.

There are strange devices everywhere. Railings run up and down a tri-tiered set of platforms, which float above a curved section of transparent floor, allowing him to see the vastness of the star-field in the distance, and the spinning asteroids in the ever chaotic belt. Above them another transparent section of the hull gives him a view of the nose-section of the Marine transport, with its bristling weapon clusters and grenade-like shape. Nothing pops out to kill him, so he breathes a bit easier and–thankfully–can finally feel his heart slowing down a bit.

He floats forward, away from the doorway and up a bit, trying to get a look at the highest of the three platforms and the strange things on it. He can only assume it's some sort of equipment for running the ship. Suddenly a metallic voice booms in his headset.

[{(< …Are you the Taskmaster…? >)}]

"Uhm… No…" Drayton replies.

Two of the mechanical arms he'd seen before, lash out of the equipment on the second tier.

The voice speaks again.

[{(< …Then you must be the pilot…Initiating neural connection…..Applying cerebral matrix ganglia…Connection established…>)}]

Drayton screams as the arms grab him. He's held down on a bench on the second tier, while countless armatures dart out and stab into his spine and head. He feels gravity kick on in the room. Suddenly he has weight, and just as quickly the pain arrives. He screams over and over as he feels something crawl into his head through his throat. Then, darkness reaches out– closes around him like a blanket–and suddenly covers the universe.

The captain leads his remaining soldier down the passageway. Once they get to the doorway that Drayton had gone through, they hover near until it opens for them. They move quickly into a ramp-like section of hallway that levels out, and continues straight as an arrow for fifty meters. According to his heads-up display they're fifty meters from the door when the ship shudders, and a voice booms in their head sets.

[{(< …Are you the Taskmaster…? >)}] It asks.

"Oh, shit," mumbles the Captain.

"Uhm… No…" Drayton says.

After the screaming starts, the voice declares that he must be the pilot.

All at once the gravity of the ship kicks on and the atmosphere of the ship normalizes. The power armors clunk

onto the variegated-alloy strands, woven to form the deck of the ship. Turning on his jump boots, the Captain starts to leap down the corridor faster than most ground cars can roll. He gets to the end of the corridor and his last marine arrives right behind him. The little door opens and the Captain dashes inside. There's a crunching sound and a scream. He turns to see that his last soldier had tried to follow him into the room and the door came down, smashing him in his armor. Inside the soldier's visor is nothing but a pool of blood. Taking a step backward, away from the door, the captain hears a gasp behind him. Turning once more he sees Drayton–his helmet pierced by ten or twelve little mechanical arms, several with multiple needle-like sensors in his head. The little miner has bulging, blood-filled eyes which glare at Leonard. His mouth is working, but no sound is coming out of it. The Captain takes a step toward him and the voice booms out once more.

[{(< …Are you the Taskmaster…? >)}]

Recalling instantly how Drayton had answered that question he replies. "Yes…"

Ten multi-jointed arms lash out of the top platform and pick him up. He starts to scream as they cut the helmet from his head and open up his skull with a rotating steel saw. There is a blinding flash of light and then he's floating in space.

Looking around he can see thousands of ships–just like this one–being made in a huge, orbital, automated factory above a world shrouded in reddish-azure clouds. It's lit by the occasional burst of violet lightning which streaks across its atmosphere like grasping claws. Each of the ships is sent

hurtling through space in many different directions to gather slaves. When a world inhabited by humanoids is found, one of them is chosen as Taskmaster and controller of the ship. From the Taskmaster's memory is gleaned the locations of colonies to harvest for slaves. Once the five decks of the ship are filled with slaves, it phase-leaps to one of the collective-slaver home worlds for processing.

The flash blurs his sight again, and this time he can see a world populated by large humanoids in purple-gray armor, wielding mighty plasma-weapons. They are a tough race. One of them became the new Taskmaster, replacing the burnt out previous controller. In this purple being's memory Leonard learns instantly of the ship's history–the previous Taskmaster knew the location of Earth and had been sent there to collect its bounty. Somehow a stray asteroid had smashed into the ship–causing the pilot to overcompensate–and they'd crashed into the ice and rock, killing the Taskmaster instantly. Without a controller the ship could not be freed. So, it had powered down and waited, while the bodies of the slaves died away and rotted to smears of organic residue in their cells.

He realizes that he's just become a danger to his entire race. However, his mind is locked from control of his body and he can only watch helplessly as the sensors of the ship come online and start to track his fellow humans. He screams for them to run away. He begs for them to fire upon the ship and destroy it, but they don't hear him. He is trapped within his own body, unable to do anything but watch in horror.

Leonard feels his consciousness pulled full circle and

suddenly his ship is surrounded by hundreds of slaves, lit on his display panel as glowing red icons. He sends the arms out to snatch them. There is a whole system worth of outposts here to harvest, starting with these few and eventually on to the gleaming third planet.